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How To Talk About Ethics In The Workplace

Research shows that one of the most important elements of building an ethical culture is the consistent use of moral language on the part of senior leadership. In order to create an ethical work environment, executives need to talk about ethics in ways that are consistent, unambiguous and direct.

Research also indicates that many executives are reluctant to use moral language in the workplace. "Moral muteness," a term coined by F.B. Bird and J.A. Walters more than 20 years ago refers to the avoidance of moral language by business leaders who are genuinely committed to doing business in accordance with ethical principles. ("The Moral Muteness of Managers," *California Management Review*, 1989.)

Why are leaders reluctant to express ethical views to others?

One obstacle is the perceived unwillingness of others to participate in ethical conversations. Senior executives can find it difficult to talk about values, given the pervasive relativism expressed by many organization employees. The theory of moral relativism is that it is impossible to morally judge the actions of those outside one's own particular culture or historical period. The consequences of accepting moral relativism include the inability to critique reprehensible past actions in a meaningful way.

When the consequences of these actions

are better understood, most people definitively reject moral relativism and agree that it is possible to condemn certain unethical actions. However, if it is true that most people are not moral relativists, how can we explain the experience of senior executives (and many others whom I have spoken to) who claim that it is nearly impossible to get employees to talk about values?

Conversations about ethics and values can be challenging. We struggle with openly disagreeing with other people on moral grounds, since it may appear that in doing so we place ourselves on the "moral high ground."

When was the last time you challenged the decisions of a loved one in explicitly moral terms? If you're like me, it may take you a while to find an example. My husband and I are both managers, and on the infrequent occasions when we offer each other advice, we tend to speak in terms of efficiency, i.e. "this seems to work" rather than in terms of values, i.e. "this is unfair." We focus exclusively on what tactics are successful rather than questioning whether they coincide with our personal values. If it is challenging to talk about ethics with your spouse—a person with whom you probably have a good relationship—then imagine how difficult it can be to talk to your co-workers.

Conversations about ethics and values can be difficult to definitively resolve. Is it

really possible to determine what is meant by such abstract concepts as justice or fairness? Perhaps it would be best to leave the philosophical musings to ivory tower academics and get on with conducting real business.

In addition, there is a perception that someone who is willing to talk about ethics lacks the toughness to be an effective leader. This is based on the assumption that making tough choices means making choices that are unethical. In fact, the opposite is more often the case. It takes courage to make unpopular decisions that reflect ethical values, and those people who stand up for ethics are often alone in the crowd.

Given these obstacles, *how can we combat the phenomena of moral muteness?*

1. Bring people together. Everyone in an organization comes to the workplace with his own personal moral beliefs, but these should not interfere with the development of an organizational morality. When people come together as an organization, they craft an understanding of what values are important to them as an organization and how those values should be lived every day in the workplace. Values should not be imposed, but rather developed through dialogue and debate among all levels of employees.

2. Keep bringing people together. Values are dynamic. As business environments change, values need to evolve in response. One conversation is not sufficient; we need to continually ask ourselves and others how a new strategy, policy or initiative reflects an organization's values. We expand and deepen our understanding of values when they are applied to new and changing circumstances.

As individuals join the organization, it is imperative to bring them into the dialogue, regardless of their status. Constant effort and engagement is required to keep values relevant to all members of the organization. When senior leadership stops talking about values, people assume that they are no longer important.

3. Be respectful. Respect does not mean refraining from challenging the beliefs of other people. In my opinion, it is actually

disrespectful to fail to challenge the sincerely held views of others. Being respectful requires creating an environment where the views of others are not repressed by more powerful voices.

One final point. In my opinion, moral muteness in the workplace is an outgrowth of the failure of civil society to engage in respectful discussions of ethical issues. Given the often shrill tone of much of the debate we see in the media, it is not difficult to see why people express trepidation at the prospect of publicly discussing their values. Yet avoiding the use of moral language does not make ethical issues disappear but, rather, makes people feel less supported in dealing with them.

When you fail to talk about values, you lose a valuable opportunity to build and reinforce your ethical culture. It may be difficult, but the rewards far exceed the costs. 🌐