



On being an ethical leader
in the workplace

Description

Can you lead your team through the moral maze?

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We've seen some high profile ethical failures hit the headlines throughout history – the controversies surrounding rideshare giant Uber spring to mind.

These and other examples show what can happen when people at the top of an organization make poor ethical choices and end up in the news or in the courts.

There are, however, many other leaders who “raise the bar”, and inspire their teams to do the same.

These ethical leaders do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons. They put their ethics before the bottom line – and research shows that this makes it more likely their teams will be loyal, dedicated and ethical, in return.

What causes ethical failures?

Before looking at how to be an ethical leader, it is useful to consider what might lead you to an ethical failure.

Individual causes include ignoring boundaries such as organizational values or industry codes, following the crowd (“Everyone else is doing it, so why not me?”), and lack of self-control. Organizational causes include lack of positive role models, lack of codified standards of behaviour and training, and lack of accountability.



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How to be an ethical leader

Now, let's walk through six steps you can take to define ethical standards, and to start putting those high standards into practice.

1. Define your organization's values

Your people likely look to you, as their manager or leader, to set an example in ethical leadership. But to do this, you first need to know your organizations values, so that you can embody them in your day-to-day business.

Hopefully, your company has clear rules about the behaviour it expects of its people. You need to communicate these rules clearly to your team members. When people understand why ethical behaviour matters, they will more likely behave accordingly.

2. Know your personal values

Good leaders follow their own values as well as their organizational values.

To see if that's the case for you, ask yourself these questions:

- What standards of behaviour are really important to my company?
- What specific values do I admire in certain leaders? Do I identify with those values?
- Would I still live by those values, even if they put me at a competitive disadvantage?

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3. Set the tone

When you're sure of your organizational and personal values, you can begin to create the right environment for your team and your organization.

Again, being a good role model is the best way to do this. People will model their behaviour on yours and they will, in turn, set an example for others to follow. The "ripple effect" can be wide reaching.

If, for example, your company values honesty above all else, then be sure to demonstrate it by being transparent with everyone around you. And if your company values free speech, make a point of allowing your team members to openly communicate their ideas.

Next, be sure that your people know the consequences of behaviour that doesn't live up to your corporate values or



breaks the rules on ethical behaviour. These consequences don't have to be punitive, but they should remind people of the standards of behaviour that you expect of them.

Positive consequences are important too. Consider rewarding team members who consistently act according to the company values. Even a simple "thank you" note will likely be appreciated. And sharing examples of team members who did the right thing in challenging situations can reinforce and communicate values powerfully.

4. Recognize ethical dilemmas

Imagine this scenario: you're in a meeting with other top executives, and one of your colleagues is grossly exaggerating his team's performance. Instead of saying that its project will increase company earnings by 4 percent, as he told you, he's promising a 12 percent increase.

What would you do? He's a close colleague and a personal friend, but, on the other hand, he's being dishonest. Should you support him, or tell the truth to the other executives?

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We're often faced with tough choices in the workplace, but most ethical dilemmas aren't this obvious. So, how do you recognize them?

Identify "trigger" situations

Certain situations, such as purchasing, hiring, firing, promoting, and calculating bonuses, seem to attract ethical dilemmas, so be wary when you're involved.

And a threat to your image or income could skew your judgment. What if you make a mistake, for example – will you admit to it or try to cover it up?

By recognizing when ethical dilemmas are most likely to occur, you can be more attuned to the risk.

Listen to your "inner voice"

Your conscience likely tells you when something isn't right, creating a feeling of uneasiness. If a situation makes you uncomfortable or goes against one of your core values or beliefs, stop and think things through rationally before proceeding.

5. Deal with ethical dilemmas

Recognizing ethical dilemmas is one thing but, often, deciding what to do about them is quite another. And even when you know what you ought to do, actually doing it can be very difficult.

There are several ways to respond to an ethical dilemma:

Prepare in advance

Visualizing theoretical scenarios can help you to work through your feelings and to decide what to do in reality. In a crisis, you may only have seconds to reach a decision, so rehearsing can be a great help.

What would you do, for example, if you knew that a colleague was about to be fired, but you weren't legally allowed to tell him? How would you choose to act?



You can also conduct this exercise with your team members, to help them to recognize and prepare for ethical dilemmas of their own.

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Weigh up the evidence

In the example of your colleague presenting different information to executives than he gave to you, is there a chance that the figures changed legitimately?

Wherever possible, take the time to investigate and assess whether someone has behaved unethically, before taking action.

Reevaluate your decision before you act

If you're in a difficult situation and you're unsure what to do, try out making a decision. But, before you act on it, ask yourself how you would feel if your actions were made public. Would you be proud of what you did? If not, reconsider your decision.

Get advice

Getting input from others can help you to assess a situation more rationally, and lead to a better-quality decision. After all, even the most senior leaders take advice in difficult situations.

6. Be courageous

Sometimes, you'll act on a decision but wonder if you did the right thing. And even when you're certain that you were right, there can still be unpleasant consequences.

Consider, for example, the leader who informs an auditor about "irregular" accounting in her firm. He knows that he's been honest and correct, but the upsetting result may be that friends and colleagues lose their jobs.

'Ethical living and leading take courage and conviction. It means doing the right thing, even when it isn't popular or easy.'

So, you might be uncomfortable at times as an ethical leader, but these situations can teach you to trust yourself and your instincts. If you calm your anxiety and look logically at the situation, your instincts will often guide you in the right direction.

Key Points

Ethical living and leading take courage and conviction. It means doing the right thing, even when it isn't popular or easy.

Start by identifying your company's core values as well as your own, then set the right tone with your team and your organization. By training yourself to spot ethical dilemmas, you can then decide how to deal with them by fully assessing the situation and asking for advice where needed.

Your actions will always speak louder than your words, so set an example by following your convictions and you'll



inspire those around you to do the same.

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