

Ethics Matter!

Good Conduct: Is There an App for That?

E-tools to make us more ethical



We look to technology to fix complex issues all the time. The results are often workable solutions for even the extremely challenging issues. And simple solutions that we never even desired but now couldn't do without because they make life easier. So why not a technology solution for critical needs facing all organizations: getting individuals to make good ethical choices?

Downloaded to the smartphones of staff members and local government officials, an ethics app could offer caution on today's misstep to avoid, as well as advice on common everyday issues. Customized for the user, it would have both the organization's code of conduct and their profession's standards. Perhaps even the relevant laws. It is the technology solution for the knowledge gap.

It could also work as a personal assistant, helping a person to track progress toward the goal of being a more ethical person. It's a place where you could record on a daily basis – with lots of security of course – your good and not so good deeds. Like that popular dieter's site, you would earn or lose “points” based on your behavior.

The points concept needs work because unlike dieting, a good deed doesn't always erase a bad one. But still writing down what you are actually eating, doing, and so forth is an effective behavior modification strategy.

And at the heart of it all, it is behavior that needs to change. And it is ours. In some cases, it's true that unethical conduct is more of a knowledge gap than a behavioral lapse. Unfortunately, there are people working in organizations or elected to public office who don't know right from wrong, ethical from unethical. They didn't understand that you can't do that in public service. They didn't understand what they committed to when they joined their professional association.

Often, the issue really comes down to our behavior. We know intellectually what the right thing to do is, but we just don't do it. Why? In the context of the Penn State scandal last fall, columnist David Brooks wrote, “People are really good at self-deception. We attend to the facts we like and suppress the ones we don't. We inflate our own virtues and predict we will behave more nobly than we actually do.”

For support of his position, he looked to the authors of the Blind Spot, Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, who noted “When it comes time to make a decision, our thoughts are

dominated by thoughts of how we want to behave; thoughts of how we should behave disappear.”

How do we change behavior? We need to create organizational cultures that encourage individuals to make ethical choices and then support them when they do. There are a number of tactics that can be used, but they need to be part of an overall strategy and not used as one offs. Here they are:

- Set clear professional and organizational standards.
- Hold individuals accountable for their conduct with an objective review process. Talk about ethical issues to raise awareness.
- Engage in creative, fun, and formal training that not only builds awareness but gives individuals practical guidance about what to do when faced with an ethical problem.
- Give sound advice to those who need it.
- Make asking for help acceptable in the culture.
- Provide a safe place for anyone to report wrongdoing.

The ethics app has some promise but just as one tool in the box. As we recognize March as National Ethics Awareness Month, what is your plan to create and support an ethical workplace?

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