



For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants
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Issue No 12: Ethics and Integrity in the workplace

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Ethics and Integrity in the workplace

In almost all Visioning (strategic planning) sessions I have had with clients, the words ethical or integrity feature on a values list. I suspect that all of us have a yearning to act and do business ethically and with integrity. I also suspect another reason that it comes up on a values list is that people want to be able to think and feel that they are working for an ethical organisation with ethical management. Easily said but, I observe, not always easily done.

Ethics, according to the eminent philosopher and ethicist, Peter Singer, (1991) "...deals with values, with good and bad, with right and wrong." Ethics, I suggest, is the search for what is right or wrong in our interaction with one another and by extension with our community and the world as a whole.

Integrity goes a bit further than ethics in that it is often about doing the right thing even if it hurts. And there are many 'painful' decisions that need to be made in today's workplace. Often they are around money, however, there are many types of decisions that involve emotional hurt and pain.

There is a Yiddish word *Mench*, (that comes from the German word, meaning person or humankind). *Mench* in Yiddish can be translated to, "a decent person, or a person you look up to who has qualities that you would want in a trusted friend or colleague."

I believe that operating with integrity and in a *Mench*-like way engenders trust, and trust is a vital ingredient in all relationships. Relationships are critical in business life, and we therefore need to think carefully about things that build, and also the things that can destroy, relationships. I want to look at some dilemmas in the workplace and ask you to decide whether there is ethical behaviour, integrity or *Mench*- like behaviour:**

Recruitment Dilemmas

1. When I was recruiting, I had a candidate sign a contract to join one of my clients as a senior member of staff. My client was looking forward to him joining and had prepared his work area and completed all the usual procedures for a smooth induction. On the morning the person was to start, my client rang at 9.15am saying he has not seen or heard from the candidate.

I was concerned and phoned the candidate, only to hear that he had found another position. Understandably, my client was very disappointed that he had changed his mind and had not bothered to communicate that. In my view, this displays a gross lack of personal integrity? What do you think? What would you do if you were the candidate? What would you do if you were the employer?

2. I have a colleague whose partner has chronic ill health that will need to be managed for the rest of his life. My colleague has a senior position and sometimes needs to take time off to go to medical appointments with her partner. Her partner's ill health does not affect her work, but it does mean she has to be absent several times a year (and sometimes at the drop of a hat).

My colleague has just applied for a role with a new employer. Should she tell her prospective employer about her situation at home? What do you think? Is this a question of ethics or integrity?

Client Dilemmas (Based on real situations)

1. You are a PR consultancy approached by a large, influential foreign government to run a campaign to discredit three Nobel Peace Prize nominees who are from a small country that is in dispute with the larger one - what do you do?
2. You are an accountant asked to prepare a set of financials that present a 'rosier' picture for the sale of a business - what would you do?

The Blind eye

There are many examples of organisations (a well known Australian Bank in recent times) that turn a 'blind eye' to the questionable behaviour of very successful team members because they are 'very successful' and bring in the dollars. What does this say to the rest of the team? What does this say about adherence to systems, rules and due process?

You manage an individual who is a 'gun' salesperson or seals large deals for the organisation but does so in a way that flies in the face of expected behavior within the team, often causing disquiet, anger, jealousy and even resignations amongst the rest of the team members - what would you do?

Ethical leadership is present

You may be reading this and thinking I have only experienced poor ethical behaviour. On the contrary, I am happy to report that I have seen many examples of people behaving ethically and with absolute integrity. The purpose of this report is to ensure that the bar is held high and as leaders of today you maintain this level. It is what your people want.

The responsibility of the Manager

People in your organisation are watching how you handle these dilemmas. In particular, middle managers are often watching so that they know how to handle situations themselves, or what information they should be passing down the line to the team when they ask questions. Its useful to bear in mind that middle managers can also be feeling the pinch as they may be caught in the middle of difficult situations.

There are no hard and fast rules about tackling these dilemmas and we all have different tolerances. The key point to consider, however, is what example and tone do you want to set in your business. It is always important to discuss dilemmas with other colleagues you trust, or an experienced business coach, to get another perspective or to help you work out where you stand on the issue. Ultimately, working through dilemmas - and not hiding from them - is the absolute responsibility of leaders and managers.

When faced with a dilemma, stop and give yourself time to think about your values and the values you have agreed (even if these are implied) with your team. Ask yourself if you need to talk it over with someone. Ask yourself what the long term ramifications would be. And ask yourself, what would a *Mench* do - because that is what your people want you to be: someone to look up to.

Main takeaways

- Ethics and Integrity are what people are looking for in their workplaces
- Integrity goes a bit further than ethics in that integrity is about doing the right thing even if it hurts.
- Another word to consider is the Yiddish word *Mench* which means “decent person – a person you look up too who has qualities that you would want in a trusted friend or colleague”.
- Operating ethically engenders trust - a vital ingredient in building long term and satisfying relationships.
- Some organisations will overlook unethical behavior as the team member is a ‘gun’ salesperson or rainmaker-what does this say to the rest of the team?
- When faced with a business dilemma think carefully about the ramifications of your decision and talk it over with someone else to get another perspective.
- Finally, ask yourself is that what a *Mench* would do, as that is what your people want.

*Situations and identities have been modified too maintain confidentiality.

Peter Singer (ed) 1991, A Companion to Ethics, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pv

“The most important persuasion tool you have in your entire arsenal is integrity” Zig Ziglar

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