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The things leaders do, unwittingly and otherwise, that harm ethical culture, Part 2

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Part 1 of this two-part series was published in the August issue of ethikos.

As discussed in Part 1, organizations spend money, time, and effort on ethics messaging with the goal to get out the message, “Be ethical.” Too often that message is countermanded by leaders’ behaviors. Even the savviest of managers do things, however unwittingly, that harm their ethical cultures. Here is a further look at some of the leader behaviors that affect their organizations’ ethical cultures.

The inability to see and speak truth

Perhaps some sort of sociological or anthropological study should be done on the wide gap between frontline employees’ view of truth and that of their senior managements. Perhaps there is an evolving tolerance, perhaps it is the influence of public relations experience, or perhaps it is increasing pressure that is used to justify statements made that are not actually the truth. Whatever the reason, this disparity undermines respect and trust in senior leaders.

In a recent conversation with a respected senior leader who has oversight over operations at his company, he shared that he had just gone through a 360-degree evaluation and the feedback was clear from many employees, “He is a liar.”

Dismayed, the executive went home that night and counseled with his wife, because he did not believe that he was a liar. His wife assured him that the employees had a point. (Ah, marital bliss.) She asked him why he thought the company had him do so many presentations. He responded that he thought he was a good presenter. His wife said, “No, it’s because if there is a fire going on, you will say it is a controlled burn. If the ship is sinking, you will say that it is taking on water.” Over the next few weeks as he monitored his own responses in meetings, he realized his tendency to paint a far better picture on issues than reality demanded. In discussing high employee turnover, he suggested that it was due to natural attrition, dismissing HR’s concerns, which resulted from combining high turnover with increasing employee assistance requests, high absenteeism, and higher levels of leave requests. In other words, he was minimizing the need for exploring what might be happening with employees at the company.

When executives decline to see the reality and are less than precise in their facts, employees develop a cynicism that makes ethics training seem hypocritical. In one company that had 24-hour shift work, the IT system went down, and there was no back-up. What employees learned during the 36-hour downtime was that only the graveyard shift had been given training on how to handle recordkeeping and reporting when there was an IT shutdown. The other two shifts did not have the training. The company had not conducted the training for the day shift, because it was more costly to take employees away from their work during the day. Nonetheless, the CEO issued a press statement that assured the public that operations were normal and “we train for things like

this all the time.” The day-shift employees, who had coped with the lack of skills and training, and the graveyard-shift employees, who had been working round the clock to help those on the day shift because they had no training, were outraged. The statement by the CEO was deceptive. The CEO had not told the truth.

One understands the need to keep the public informed and not foment fear. However, the employees knew the real truth and felt that the press release was misleading. The leaders in the company had compromised their moral authority to lead and had opened the door to employees using similar types of deception when they were concerned about making disclosures.

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