

Ethikos Volume 38, Number 1. January 01, 2024 On ethics: Rupert Evill

by Rupert Evill and Adam Turteltaub

Rupert Evill (rupert@ethicsinsight.co) is Founding Director at Ethics Insight in Lewes, England, U.K.

Adam Turteltaub (adam.turteltaub@corporatecompliance.org) is Chief Engagement & Strategy Officer at SCCE & HCCA in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, USA.

AT: You've worked on four continents, often in the developing world. We often hear about the cultural differences and see pushback against the imposition of Western values. But are the differences real, or do people generally see right and wrong the same way?

RE: The differences are overstated because the initial cultural barriers can seem daunting. For instance, in some countries, discrimination against certain groups (race, religion, social standing, etc.) may suggest that reaching a consensus on human rights is untenable. But I've found that when presented with a human face to an "other group," most people want to be decent. I picked human rights, as it's one of the most obviously "Western" impositions, especially around what we might term socially progressive issues. I'm not suggesting you'll get a religious fundamentalist to wear a pride badge, but you can arrive at a "live and let live" detente. If we can achieve progress on those issues where our values seemingly differ most widely, others become easier. For example, the argument that corruption is "the way things are done" in a particular place is just such BS. Most people in that country suffer because of corruption. The conversation changes if we reframe the narrative from the patronizing, "We Westerners know best and will now tell you how to behave," to something more collaborative, like, "How can we overcome this?" Differences exist. They are overstated. Stories break down the barriers, but nothing is quite like asking open-minded questions and using your ears and mouth in the correct ratio.

AT: Where are the differences, where do they stem from?

RE: Many of us, including me, dislike being told what to do. It's especially true when delivered in a way that suggests we're likely to be stupid, defiant, or devious. Then, we have imperial overtones (cultural, financial, political, military, etc.), making it harder to swallow. If we overlay hierarchy, low/high context communication, how (not) to give feedback or disagree, and so on, there are a lot of potential pitfalls. For instance, in much of Asia, we need to consider showing *face* (respect and not publicly challenging or undermining) and high-context communication (what the Japanese call "reading the air"). The differences are often less about the topic and more about the delivery—a failure to understand the other's culture, perspective, and communication preferences.

AT: I think ethical differences are often overlooked, even within a company. I'll never forget being a part of a good-sized global organization in a previous career, and the ethics varied greatly by department. In one, the ethos seemed to be get away with anything you can. In another, it was very much by the book, and you could find everything in between. I often wonder why it doesn't that get the same attention level. What's your take?

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