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The numbers game: Society's impact on corporate ethics

by Calvin London

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Maybe it is just me or that level of skepticism you get as you get older, but it seems like society is becoming more unethical every day. Across the globe, dishonesty and unethical behavior is a widespread and common phenomenon. Reports of ethical misconduct in business, politics, sports, education, and medicine appear all too frequently. Politicians lying, police officers stealing, teachers abusing their students, someone has opened fire on a school, someone else has been seriously injured by a case of road rage, while others have their life savings embezzled from under their noses.

Unethical behavior in society

Moral or ethical behavior is postulated as being a desirable human trait—the idea that “everybody wants to do the right thing,” a concept I have discussed previously.^[1] I am not so sure; it has been demonstrated that when encountering an opportunity to act dishonestly or unethically and benefit from this action, a large percentage of people are prepared to do so.^[2]

People have also become very good at convincing themselves that their unethical acts are not really that bad compared to others, judging people's transgressions more harshly than their own and presenting themselves as more virtuous and ethical by comparison.^[3]

Look around your environment; you will see people parking illegally, using disabled parking spots when not disabled, and vandalizing property that is not theirs. Many are happy to break the speed limit and justify that it is only by a couple of miles per hour. There is an astounding number of people who try to smuggle a few apples, nuts, flower seeds, or exotic meat products across the border despite knowing they are not permitted; they justify the action as “not really that bad,” and the chances of getting caught are low.

In many cases, unethical behavior results when someone feels so entitled that they believe the rules of decent behavior don't apply to them. In others, unacceptable behavior may result from peer pressure when others play along and gradually begin to accept and embody bad behavior as the norm. This is particularly prominent in younger generations, where the fear of being left out can quickly reshape behavior.

In some countries, citizens have realized they can profit more by circumventing laws than by obeying them, and the absence of punishment has gradually weakened their ethical objections to breaking laws. Nonethical behavior can also be affected by an individual's environment. If there is little incentive to behave ethically, a growing number of people choose not to do it.

Take, for instance, the story about how in one Chinese province, people who might formerly have helped those involved in an accident instead chose to seek personal benefits and robbed an overturned vehicle of goods rather than help citizens injured during this accident.^[4] We have also seen other similar occurrences after natural

disasters.

Sadly, society is also heading in the direction where the average person who witnesses unethical behavior turns a blind eye. Who can blame them? The chances of confronting someone about parking in the wrong spot or even a seemingly minor traffic infringement can result in serious bodily harm, and even if they do make a report, would anything be done about it?

Unethical behavior is increasing because people are realizing it is better to “mind your own business” than tangle with someone in a confrontation that could have serious consequences. There are also cases of justified neglect when people don’t speak up about ethical breaches because they are thinking of more immediate rewards, such as staying on a good footing with their peers.

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