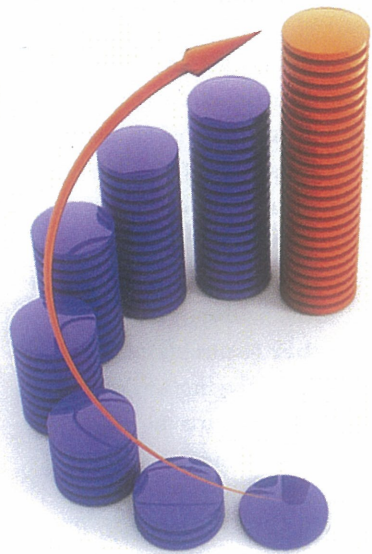


Future values



A spate of incidents involving corporate greed and perfidy — think Enron or Bernie Madoff — and the global financial crisis that triggered off a recession in many countries has brought the spotlight on ethics at the workplace. Nan DeMars, a Minneapolis-based ethics seminar leader, author and TV and radio talk-show host, speaks to Nithin Rao on evolving ethical standards and the role that ethics will play in shaping the future organisation

Q Your recent interaction with the ethics counsellors of Tata companies was hugely successful. What are the messages you would like to reinforce?

I would like to reiterate the importance of the ethical priority compass. It has just three points:

- Take care of yourself — you must protect your professional reputation and your financial security; do so in a way that it is aligned to your own morals and values.
- Take care of your company and its customers; without them you have no livelihood, so they certainly deserve your best efforts and loyalty.
- Take care of your supervisors.

You are totally accountable for your actions in the business world. Whatever the situation, whether a supervisor is harassing you, or you see a co-worker stealing, or your manager asking you to lie for her, or you unexpectedly discover an explosive trail of compromising emails, document the incident for your own protection. Also do not confuse character with compromise. If it is absolutely necessary to do something questionable, then safeguard yourself with

documentation. You ought not to compromise your personal morals and values.

The next most important point is taking care of the company and its customers. You must continuously act in your company's best interests and prevent it from participating in illegal behaviour. Lastly, take care of your supervisor. This is a professional relationship that merits loyalty, but you should never be blind or offer unconditional loyalty. Your manager holds considerable power over you regarding your assignment, compensation, networking and advancement, but he is also an individual and must have the interests of the company in mind. That must be borne in mind.

Q What are the other issues that need to be highlighted?

We must remember that we are like fishes in a bowl — everybody is watching what corporates and employees are doing. Successful companies are establishing ethics, which has an important role, that live in every corner of the building. In this context, an ethical office must possess three chief characteristics or the 3Cs:

- **Corporate conscience**, which is the shared understanding and agreement of standards or acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. This is accomplished by establishing an agreed upon and documented code of ethics and conduct, or a mission statement. The values and standards should not be framed and hung on the wall, but they must be a dynamic living part of the organisation's culture, inspiring employees at all levels to change their behaviour.
- **Commitment** to hold yourself personally responsible and accountable for your company's standards. People in the ethical office have a right and an obligation to their colleagues to uphold their

organisation's commitment to specific, agreed upon codes of conduct.

- **Communication**, an ongoing discussion about ethical issues that promotes trust and fairness. This emphasises the expectations that employees will conform to the company's code of conduct.

The Tata group has many ethics counsellors, which is fabulous. They are point persons for employees to approach for help.

Q Is ethics a cultural issue? Does one define ethics differently for people in India, vis-a-vis those in the US or in the UK?

I don't think so. I believe the bottom line will always be to do the right thing. Ethics may start in a cultural context, but they quickly move to a personal one because people are involved. I believe, like politics, ethical choices are 95 per cent local. For instance, ethical choices about how we treat our co-workers are intensely personal. Cultural biases and preconceptions evaporate as soon as personal connection is made. I have seen it consistently in my workshops, and this gives me great optimism for a more ethical global workplace.

Q How different is being ethical as an individual from that as an employee?

There is no difference because you are who you are. Even Mickey Mouse used to say you have to be who you are. An employee comes to the work place with his or her own set of values and morals. In the workplace there may be several acceptable answers to ethical dilemmas, so you could end up with conflicting views. We do know though, the greater the difference, the greater the stress for the employees. If you hold conflicting ethical standards, at home and at office, then you lead two lives, one fake and the other organic. You can do it for a while, but it is