

Ethics is a Team (Not Solo) Sport

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“Teams outperform individuals acting alone . . . especially when performance requires multiple skills, judgments, and experiences” (Jon R. Katzenbach & Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams*, 1993, 1999, p.9).

There are, of course, times when individuals, unleashed from groups, are the source of incredible creativity, productivity, and accomplishment. Part of great leadership is to liberate and empower individual accomplishment.

And part of great leadership is inculcating personal responsibility. Individuals must not make a habit of hiding behind groups or organizations to evade personal responsibility.

But having said that, the companion observation has to be about the importance and potential of teams and teamwork. There are tasks and challenges for which there is no substitute for the wisdom and power of teams. This is certainly true in the business strategy domain but also in major personnel decisions, technology strategy, mergers and acquisitions, and many other areas.

Corporate ethics benefits from a team approach and suffers from individualism. Ethics is a team sport, not a solo sport, if I can use that metaphor. Ethics isn't golf or marathon running; it's basketball, soccer, or baseball.

Now ideally, we want five players on each team and a full court for basketball. But the “essence of basketball” still exists when it's two on two, half court. So too in organizational ethics: some formal, high performance teams (e.g., the Ethics Committee) are desirable for some tasks and occasions. But the team idea needs to be practiced at all levels, on all occasions, even if it is no more than getting on the phone to get some input from one colleague.

Passive Individuals Sitting in Front of Computer Screens

Virtually all of the compliance and ethics programs being sold to today's companies indoctrinate employees into an individualistic approach to ethics. The creation of the ethics and values program does not involve the practitioners but is imposed from outside; the training itself amounts to little more than an individual sitting down in front of a computer and punching their way through a few scenarios with prefabricated outcomes. “Bingo! You are trained for this year. Hit print and get your certificate.”

Ethical dilemmas and quandaries are often complex. We are muddling our way through to the wisest possible decision. We are walking through grey areas and having to choose the least bad or most good option. It's not black and white. Resolving ethical conflicts takes tremendous creativity and imagination, seeking win-win solutions that are not apparent on first glance. Multiple perspectives help us see issues more accurately. Multiple brainstorming minds can uncover or invent options unseen by individuals. It is a recipe for ethical weakness for organizations to fall into the individualism trap.

Figure It Out Together

To begin with, the code of ethics (and the organization's core values) will be vastly improved if the practitioners are involved in writing it. No one knows the ethical challenges and temptations of being a sales representative like the sales representatives, for example. They should be brought together as a team to write or rewrite the guidelines for getting it right in their domain.

And when an important specific challenge comes up on the job, the habit should be to put your head together with a teammate or two to figure out the best way to apply the company guidelines.

Figuring out the standards, and figuring out how to apply them in specific cases: these are best viewed as team things.

Train Together

But employees are unlikely to call on a colleague if they have been trained to sit alone in front of a computer when doing ethics.

Company ethics training is something that really should occur primarily in group contexts. Even one annual two-hour ethics and values group training session can contribute significantly to organizational ethical health. At Harris & Associates (Concord CA), company leaders urge all employees to attend one two-hour session per year. Two of the organization's six core values are discussed each year: what do these concepts mean? How can we live them out? What are our challenges to living out these values? What ethical dilemmas related to these two core values might arise in our company? How could we analyze and resolve these dilemmas? One third presentation, one third small breakout group discussion, one third large group discussion and sharing of takeaway insights.

An online version of the annual company ethics and values training is available late in the year to those who missed out on the face to face, group training, or who wish to review the concepts. But it is definitely Plan B. Plan A is to learn how to work together on our ethics and values.

Carry It Out Together

Ethics is not just about teams "figuring it out" together; it is also about "carrying it out" together. It isn't enough for a team (informal or otherwise) to help figure out what someone should do---and then cut them loose to live or die on their own. The team thing means standing by, supporting, encouraging, checking up, sometimes even accompanying the teammate. Our diversity of perspectives and experiences enriches the moral discernment, "figure it out" process. And our diversity of abilities and strengths empowers the "carry it out" process in ethics.

So forget that Lone Ranger ethics approach. It is just setting up your employees for frustration, struggle, and disappointment. Organizational ethics is a team thing, start to finish.