



Administrator's ROUNDTABLE

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Trickle-Up Ethics

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Whatever else emerges from events of the recent past, the last year has distinguished itself as one in which public trust and simple ethics were oxymoronic and self-contradictory. In the choice of political leadership, both appointed and elected, in the sporting arena, in the corporate boardroom, even in the administration of philanthropy and the distribution of charity, we have been witness to one social or political institution after the other racked by corruption. Greed and avarice appear the order of the day, balanced by sensational expressions of moral bankruptcy.

But for millions, the rank-in-file who work deep within these institutions, high-profile examples of grand corruption on (and off) the job are little more than headlines. Essentially decent and hard-working folk, they strive to perform competently in increasingly difficult economic circumstances, often operating under a cloud of cynicism.

Yet they all face a less sensational, but no less insidious, ethical problem, which is lost in the tabloid jabbering of the popular media: pedestrian dishonesty. No theft, no misappropriations, no junkets, no kickbacks—just a gnawing undercurrent of mistrust and suspicion that seems both accepted and encouraged. And often it arises from profound dilemmas in the very nature of their tasks.

Attorneys offer an obvious example. Are they primarily advocates for their clients or do they serve as officers of the court? Ideally, they are both, yet the two are often incompatible, forcing an inevitable compromise in both honesty and judgment. The choice is often, painfully, between roles as

“hired guns” and as self-righteous dispensers of justice.

Similarly, consider the relationship between client and provider in almost any social service agency. Whether the subject is benefits, eligibility, or filing requirements, honesty is the rare policy. Case workers seem to be of several minds here. Some argue that they too must be advocates for their clients—even if it means teaching them how to “beat the system” to increase their benefits or extend eligibility. Others turn cynical about both system and client, resigning themselves with sullen indifference to their tasks, thus attaining neither compassion nor honesty.

And what of the relationship between co-workers and supervisors? In assessing performance, managers are often as intimidated by the need to evaluate the work of their subordinates as are those under review. The whole process is reduced to a superficiality that satisfies neither the demand for quality nor an honest desire for constructive feedback.

The already difficult professional job market has been impacted as well. Personnel officers have come to look askance at job applicants. Resumes, certificates, or letters of reference simply cannot be trusted at face value.

At issue here is not some abstract conception of purist ethics. Pedestrian dishonesty has profoundly practical consequences. It bespeaks a wide-spread inability to maintain professional posture as everything suffers from suspicion. The absence of sincerity and candor among co-workers yields frustration and jaded indifference; self-respect erodes.

The sum robs us of motivation, satisfaction and, ultimately, of productivity. Notwithstanding the recent swipes of Japanese observers, the American workplace is marked more by cynicism than sloth. With one eye

trained over the shoulder, little room is left for quality, creativity, and excellence.

At a time when respect for personal and institutional integrity plummets; when popular leadership flaunts questionable moral standards; and when pundits and commentators seriously suggest that personal ethical failings don't make any real difference, it is no small matter to promote honesty in personal relations or on the job. Cynicism and moral apathy result from dishonesty and suspicion. But they also grow from the sense that no one really cares. Merely to give up is hardly an adequate answer. To paraphrase an ancient Hebrew sage: “When there is no one else around, you be the one.” If national leaders refuse to, or cannot, provide appropriate models for ethical behavior, the little guy and gal must brighten the path.

Perhaps a national sense of revulsion will cleanse the moral qualities of our life. If integrity won't flow from above, then it just may grow from below. The time has come for “trickle-up ethics.”

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