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How to Tackle Long-Standing Ethical Misconduct in the Workplace

By Sarah Perry

The ethical choices your employees make inevitably define the reputation of your organization. Most will make the right decisions based upon a combination of their own moral compasses and what is already ingrained in organizational culture. This is fine, providing employees possess good judgment and the work culture is great. But what if one or both of those factors are lacking? What if inherent problem of harassment, discrimination or other conduct issues preclude fully ethical behavior?

Often, unethical behavior starts off mild, being hardly noticeable at first and only gradually developing into a major problem. Employees may become desensitized to the signs or feel awkward and unsure about what to do when minor transgressions occur. They turn a blind eye to the "little stuff." Too soon, the unethical behavior is perceived as normal. By that point, it is undermining organizational culture and may even be repulsing new talent.

Alarmingly, 51 percent of U.S. workers said they have observed unethical or illegal misconduct on the job. The National Business Ethics Survey conducted by Ethics & Compliance Initiative that uncovered this also revealed that among individuals who observed wrongdoing, 87 percent of employees at organizations with effective ethics and compliance programs reported it. Only 32 percent of employees at organizations that lacked compliance programs reported instances of wrongdoing.

Why people behave the way they do has multiple, interrelated explanations. An organization's behavioral change program has to be multipronged in response. Several tactics deployed over a

period of time are needed to achieve results. A one-off workshop or a single all staff email will not suffice.

Barriers, Triggers and Motivators

HR professionals tasked with transitioning conduct can take inspiration from Unilever's Five Levers for Change. This successful initiative seeks to make desired behaviors understandable, easy to apply, desirable, rewarding and habitual. Created to promote consumer sustainability practices to Unilever's two billion customers, the same approach can be applied to promote ethical behavior in the workplace.

As the video at https://youtu.be/clMk_5PCL80 points out, identifying the things that stop people from adopting a new behavior from the outset is key. In the workplace, an example could be poor timekeeping. Employees turn up late for work, take extended lunch breaks and run behind for meetings. When there appear to be no consequences for tardiness, employees do not see the need to change.

Applying levers for change requires finding triggers that push employees to adopt new behaviors. One such trigger could be a determined effort by managers to lead by example. When senior staff members arrive for work on time, meet deadlines and exercise discipline in personal timekeeping, employees will take the hint. Another trigger could be installing software like Desk Time (https://desktime.com) on staff computers. The program generates reports on attendance, productivity and application use.

The final steps involve motivating employees to make new behaviors old habits. Publicly praising good timekeepers and incentivizing on-time meetings help accomplish this.

Drive Change Via a Multi-Asset Campaign

Effective communication underlies any successful organizational change initiative. But how do you get the message to form new habits across systematically?

Creating change messages that appeal to and are consumed by every employee can be tough. With so many different demographics, one size cannot fit all. Plus, workers already suffer from information overload.

Prioritize Topics

Deciding on which ethical area to focus on first can also be overwhelming, so you need to prioritize. Start by performing an online search for "examples of ethical dilemmas in the workplace." Select those most relevant to your organization from the top results.

> ## "Applying levers for change requires finding triggers that push employees to adopt new behaviors."

Also reach out to your workforce and ask them to submit topics anonymously. Soliciting this feedback will ensure your training is up-to-date and relevant. You may even uncover an emerging ethical dilemma you did not know about.

Plan Your Campaign

Pick a single topic; the most successful change campaigns are the most focused. Create a series of communication assets that focus exclusively on the single topic. Include internal and external triggers in your schedule. For example, emailing a timely reminder on the policy for giving and receiving gifts in early November ahead of Thanksgiving and Christmas will resonate more than at any other time of the year.

Automate for Best Results

Automating internal communication campaigns as much as possible helps maintain consistency and reliability in messaging. Messages can be repeated and pushed out over time, ideally using a variety of formats.

Drip-feeding information to employees systematically produces a cumulative effect in which the main message sinks in almost without anyone really noticing. But be careful not to overwhelm your audience with too much information. Micro-learning—short, snappy, frequent—achieves the best results.

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