

THE ETHICS STATEMENT v. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Rochester Area Business Ethics Foundation puts a great deal of weight on the Ethics Statements submitted by aspirants to our Rochester Business Ethics Award, and rightly so. But from the perspective of an aspiring company, especially the small companies that seek our award, should merely having an Ethics Statement be enough, or should they, and we, consider this question from other perspectives?

Rushworth Kidder is truly an ethicist, and has written widely about ethics issues. In his book entitled *How Good People Make Tough Choices*¹, he offers the following observations with respect to Corporate Ethics Codes:

First, and most notable, the Code or Statement should be brief. He strongly advocates a Code that brings “into focus a core of moral values that is concise and easily memorized.”

Second, he states that a code “is not usually explanatory.” To support his point, he points out that the Ten Commandments gets the prize for brevity, adding that two of the world’s best-known commands, against killing and stealing, take but four words each. He adds that once definitions are clear, there is no room for waffling.

Third, he notes that an ethics code can be expressed in a number of forms: “It can be positive or negative, a definition or an exhortation, a set or single words or a series of elaborated sentences.”

Finally, it centers on moral values, typically leaving aside “the lettuce values drawn from realms of taste, politics, economics, and other hotly debated but morally neutral realms of human experience.”

I have at my desk two Ethics Statements from major national corporations. One is 40 pages long and the other is 34 pages long. They are both expertly researched and written. The graphics are interesting and they are printed beautifully, and they are undoubtedly of great value to the large companies involved. One wonders, however, whether they are intended for anyone to read, or even to understand, let alone to memorize, as Kidder suggests.

The friends that we have made in small companies in this area should consider Kidder’s valuable suggestions – with the added caveat that their ethical statements be written especially by and for the small company in question.

Some other thoughts: It would seem likely that management’s writing an Ethics Code without involving company employees in the process might itself be described as unethical conduct. It also seems obvious that a regular review of the Ethics Code would be in order. One review might be by management alone, but finding a way to regularly remind employees of the ethical expectations of the company will serve everyone well.

¹ Rushworth M. Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*, (New York, NY, Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 86-87)