

## Workplace ethics have improved during the recession - but then what?

The Ethics Resource Center's prestigious biannual report on business ethics was published in November of 2009 ([www.ethics.org/nbes](http://www.ethics.org/nbes)). The report concludes that "the key measures of ethical behavior- the amount of misconduct observed, the willingness to report misdeeds, the strength of ethical cultures and the pressure to cut corners - all improved since ERC's last survey in 2007, just before the recession started."

1. 56% of employees said in 2007 that they had witnessed misconduct on the job, while the number in 2009 was down to 49%.

Here is a partial list of the events of ethical misconduct and misdeeds referred to by the ERC as well as the percentage of the US workforce observing them in 2009:

Company resource abuse	23%
Abusive behavior	22%
Lying to employees	19%
Email or Internet abuse	18%
Conflicts of interest	16%
Discrimination	14%
Lying to outside stakeholders	12%
Employee privacy breach	10%

2. 63% of employees reported misconduct when they observed it, up from 58% in 2007.

3. Perceived pressure to commit an ethics violation - to cut corners or worse- declined from 10% to 8% in 2009.

Sound terrific? Not really. One of the report's conclusions was that the positive results of its study are likely to be temporary. "We are beginning to see an important connection between workplace ethics and the larger economic and business cycle: when times are tough, ethics improve. When business thrives and regulatory intervention remains at status quo, ethics erode. We can expect this pattern to continue."

There is no reason to doubt the conclusions of the survey. Somehow, though, the recession will end. Ethical companies must anticipate that happy occurrence and find a way to resist the temptation of poor ethical practices and attacks on their ethical culture.