

It takes more than good intentions to be an ethical leader

In the summer of 1998, at a Witco Corp. chemical plant in Bergkamen, Germany, a worker in the container cleaning department had a problem. A pressure vessel used to transport aluminum alkyls had been returned by a customer for a routine cleaning. Once cleaned, such containers were refilled and shipped out with fresh product. The problem was that this particular container was returned with some solidified material at the bottom that stubbornly remained after several attempts to remove it using the prescribed method.

For those of you unfamiliar with aluminum alkyls, you should know that they are highly reactive compounds used in plastics and rubber manufacturing. They spontaneously burn when they come in contact with air, and they practically explode when they come into contact with water. Take a minute to Google “aluminum alkyls fire video” and you’ll see how “exciting” working with this stuff can be.

The safety protocols associated with cleaning aluminum alkyl containers specifically mandated that they not be sealed unless all product was first removed. Nevertheless, anxious to get the job done, the frustrated worker decided to take a more aggressive approach to dislodging the solid mass. He added solvents, sealed the container and placed it on a large machine designed to rotate aluminum alkyl containers for thorough cleaning before reuse.

Shortly after the container began rotating, the solid crust inside did become dislodged. Unfortunately, this brought the cleaning solvents into contact with pure, unreacted aluminum alkyl that had been sealed underneath. The violent explosion that followed killed one person, seriously injured another and destroyed everything in the area.

Several weeks later at Witco’s world headquarters in Greenwich, Conn., in my role as the company’s safety, health and environmental counsel, I was discussing the explosion with Roger Sharp, Witco’s executive vice president and chief of global operations. At one point in our conversation, Roger paused, looked down and with deep conviction and obvious emotion in his voice



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said, “Jim, I haven’t been worth a damn to this company. A man died and a woman was terribly burned and disfigured for life. It happened on my watch, and it’s my fault.”

When Roger said this, I thought he was being absurdly hard on himself and a bit unrealistic. He had arrived at the company only two years earlier and had led efforts during that time to improve our safety performance from the bottom 10 percent to the top 10 percent in the chemical industry. But Roger’s words have haunted me over the years, and I now believe them to be true.

Not only was he to blame for this tragic explosion and its consequences, but so was I, along with everyone else who was then in a position of responsibility in the company. Although the safety policies at Witco said the right things, we as company leaders had failed to create and sustain a safety culture that was strong enough to make taking such a foolish risk unthinkable when cleaning that container.

Most business leaders are nice, decent people with good intentions. They have a genuine set of moral convictions and a determination to do what is right. Business leaders who act on these sentiments, conscientiously discerning what is right and consistently exhibiting the courage to live within moral boundaries, can legitimately consider themselves “ethical.”

But as laudable as such a personal achievement may be, they cannot necessarily claim to be “ethical leaders.” Much, much more is required to achieve that goal. As Roger Sharp tried to teach me more than a decade ago, the reality is that even the best of intentions and model personal behavior “don’t mean a damn” unless these qualities are manifested in actions that effectively induce others to behave well.

By this definition, becoming an ethical leader is not likely to be achieved by accident. Instead, it requires a deliberate, sustained and intelligent investment of time and attention. At the least, even if you are already an ethical business professional, you must take these additional steps to become an ethical leader:

- Discern clearly what “good” looks like in your area of responsibility. This is the critical work necessary to answer fundamental questions such as: How safe is safe enough? What is a fair wage for a fair day’s work? How reliable is reliable enough for our products?

- Make the investments necessary personally, organizationally and financially to communicate your vision of good effectively and pursue it. This includes basic leadership activities: setting clear expectations; investing in systems to gather and report to you the information necessary to understand where your team or your company is in relation to your vision; holding others accountable for achieving those expectations by rewarding those who do and disciplining those who do not.

- Making it happen in your company or area of responsibility. Remember, the measure of your effectiveness as an ethical leader is not how hard you try but the extent to which you succeed in influencing the behavior of others.

- Always take personal responsibility for the ultimate outcome of your efforts.

We must clear a high bar to be regarded as ethical business leaders. But it’s important for conscientious business professionals not to shrink from this challenge. The question of whether we are “worth a damn” to our organizations hangs in the balance.

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