

Pressure to conform can be obstacle to corporate ethics

I have a small collection of cowboy hats that my family and I purchased a few years ago while visiting the Stockyards in Fort Worth, Texas. Even though we are New Yorkers and generally prefer baseball caps to Stetsons, we felt very comfortable wearing our hats in the heart of cowboy country, where everyone was wearing them. However, once we returned home, we put the hats on the shelf, and that is where they stayed until I recently brought them with me to a business ethics workshop I conducted for some managers at Bausch & Lomb.

During the ethics workshop, I began a discussion about how we as managers can create and sustain an ethical culture by placing one of the hats on one of the participants and asking him how he felt.

He said, "I feel stupid. I'm the only one here wearing a funny hat."

I then asked the group if they had ever been in a room full of people that were talking themselves into doing something unethical and felt like they were the only ones that saw things differently. There were universal nods of agreement.

I then asked, "Do you remember the discomfort and anxiety you felt as you decided whether to speak up?" They nodded again.

Pressures to conform

As the victim of my hat experiment continued to suffer alone, we discussed the pressure we all feel at work to conform and its implications for managers desiring to promote an ethical culture. In so doing, we made the following three observations:

1. It may be uncomfortable, but sometimes we have to "put on the funny hat" and speak up to stop others from riding off in the wrong direction. This is often easier said than done, but it is an essential part of building an ethical culture and avoiding corporate scandal.

2. It's not good enough just to raise a concern. We must also find a way to persuade colleagues to change direction. One way to do this is by asking a number of important questions like:

- Is it legal?

- Legal or not, is it consistent with our



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company's values and long-term goals?

- What would happen if we were caught?

- Are we compromising our standards for short-term gain?

- What kind of company do we want to be?

- How will it impact our company's reputation?

- What is the likely impact on employees?

3. It's important for leaders to make a point of inviting their teams to "put on the funny hat" by asking if they see problems with a particular idea or decision. Doing so will encourage the open and frank discussions needed for sound decision-making.

Showing support

Following this discussion, I placed cowboy hats on the heads of several other participants. I asked my first victim how he felt now. He took a moment and looked around the room. He said that he felt better because he was not the only person wearing a funny hat.

I asked the group whether they had ever been in a meeting where they stuck their necks out and one or more people in the room spoke up to support them. Many in the group indicated that they had and that the support they received meant a lot to them.

This led to the following observations about the actions managers can take to promote an ethical culture:

- When someone else in the room disagrees with a majority opinion, consider such opinions seriously.

- Don't remain silent. If you agree with the contrary view, speak up.

- Even if you disagree with the dissent-

er, express appreciation for their candor in stating an unpopular view.

A room full of hats

I had run out of hats, but I asked the group to imagine what would have happened if I placed hats on every person's head except one. They concluded that the lone hatless person would likely feel left out.

This observation led to the most important insight of the workshop. One of the participants said: "Maybe what we need to do is create an environment in which the one who wants to do it the wrong way is the odd person out." In other words, don't just look at the social pressure to conform as a force to resist, but as one that managers can use to drive behaviors in the right direction.

The whole idea behind achieving an ethical culture is to exploit the universal desire to "fit in" to reduce misconduct and create a great place to work. The following are some practical steps managers can take to actually make this happen:

- Master the rules relating to your responsibilities. This is especially important in highly regulated areas where the "right way" might be dependent upon a sophisticated understanding of complex rules.

- Set clear expectations about standards of conduct and incorporate desirable ethical behaviors into performance evaluation criteria.

- Take every opportunity to stress the importance of doing the job right.

- Anticipate problem areas where ethical and compliance issues may arise. Train your work force to recognize them and respond properly. Scenario-based training is an ideal approach.

- Most importantly, "walk the talk" as a manager. Take principled stands even in cases where doing so may take more time or cost more money than doing things the wrong way.

I've returned my cowboy hats to the closet where they'll likely remain until the next ethical culture workshop. But they did the trick in helping a group of B&L managers discover some key insights into what they can do to create and sustain an ethical cul-

ture in which all employees feel comfortable putting on a funny hat, sitting tall in the saddle and riding together confidently in the kind of company they can be proud of.

Business Ethics debuts this week as a

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