

Wiki-ethics?

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Ethics is a social and relational thing. It is about how we should treat one another (people and planet). It is largely a collaborative enterprise.

Creating A Code of Ethics

With a few qualifications, corporate ethics can be helped by becoming a kind of “wiki-ethics.” The most obvious place to begin is with the organization’s code of ethics. Ever since I started researching, teaching, and consulting more than three decades ago, it has seemed to me that the best people to write a code of ethics are the practitioners in the trenches---not management, not HR, and certainly not some external consulting firm.

First of all, it is a question of expertise. Who knows the ethical temptations to cut corners or bend the rules in sales transactions like people in sales? Who knows the temptations and dilemmas of accounting better than accountants? In hiring better than HR? My approach is to ask all employees to describe how they spend their time on the job. Map out their business practices. Then think about a new employee hired to take on these roles and practices (maybe a new branch office somewhere). Assume that you can’t be available 24/7 to mentor the new employee through every possible circumstance. Now write a couple simple, clear, but adequate guidelines to help keep those practices on track: avoiding trouble, achieving the goals. A certain amount of editing and iterating is required before the code is ready to roll out but this is the core exercise. In the end, the code is radically better fitted to company reality than some abstract legalisms created and handed down by external authorities.

Periodically the guidelines need to be reviewed and updated: go back to the practitioners for this help. Could the code be posted on the company web site for a month, inviting and allowing employees to edit to text directly, Wikipedia-style? Not a bad idea at all, though (like Wikipedia itself) the final editorial responsibility must lie with management.

Second, a collaboratively written code like this is “owned” by the people. They wrote it, they own it. Wiki-ethics is not just about expertise but ownership. Usually, if we made something and own it, we embrace it, value it, and care for it. Wonder why company codes of ethics are generally boring and un-valued by employees? Because they are experienced as flawed abstractions coming from upstairs where they really don’t know what’s going on in our life in the trenches.

Interpreting, Applying, and Evaluating our Company Ethics

Company ethics training so often directs people to sit as isolated individuals in front of computer screens to fill out this year’s compliance and ethics training. But life and ethics is not like that. This is a distinctly second-rate approach to ethics and values training. Far better to bring people together in seminars, discussions, and focus groups to discuss issues, standards, and the best resolution of dilemmas that may come up. So too on line: better to host some threaded discussions and blogs about company ethics, than just a one-directional content presentation to passive viewers.

“Interpreting and applying”---*figuring out* what’s right and *carrying out* what’s right---are usually complex and challenging tasks in our organizations. Collaborating with others is an essential process in lifting our ethical health and performance above the norm.

“Evaluating” our ethics is also a process that benefits from wide discussion and commentary. All employees, not just all managers, should be surveyed about the strengths and weaknesses of our stated standards, our training, our performance on our ethics and values. Ethics audits and assessments must be “upward” (employees evaluating management and the company) as well as “downward” (management evaluating employees).

Healthier (and wikier) still, inviting suggestions and evaluations from outside the company is a move likely to add value. Competitors, partners, academics, community and family members---why not be transparent and open about our standards and guidelines and invite a broader input?

Preserve the Core . . . Stimulate Progress

Jim Collins and Jerry Porras's *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (1994) argued that sustainably great companies always demonstrated a kind of yin/yang dialectic of tenaciously preserving and guarding their core purpose/mission/vision/values on the one hand and radically, boldly experimenting/reaching/developing/growing on the other.

Collins and Porras give lots of business history and data to make their point but I think it is also common sense. We can embrace and benefit from chaos to the extent we are anchored to our core purpose. The criterion for evaluating the ideas and possibilities in the wiki-chaos is the potential to contribute to the purpose.

So too in ethics: the legitimacy of our ethics depends on its alignment with the organization's core purpose and mission. Our code of ethics is an account of how to get there from here, how to treat one another, our stakeholders, and the environment in order to achieve our mission and vision with sustainable excellence and success. The organizational core mission and vision must welcome comment and seek ownership by all the members of the organization. But they cannot be open to negotiation to nearly the same degree as the details of the code of ethics. (if they are, what we are considering is an entirely new organization).

An open, collaborative "wiki-ethics" is the way to go---so long as it is anchored in a clear, strong, inspiring organizational mission and vision.