

Ethics in the Workplace

I almost choked on my beer when I heard on the evening news that Bernard Ebbers, ex-CEO of Worldcom, had been sentenced to 25 years in prison for his part in the scandal that brought down the firm, the toughest sentence yet in the recent spate of corporate scandals.

It took only a moments reflection however to understand the severity of the sentence. Worldcom's collapse was the biggest bankruptcy in US corporate history with approximately 20,000 employees losing their jobs when the company filed for bankruptcy protection following an US\$ 11 billion accounting fraud. Ebbers was convicted of fraud, conspiracy and seven counts of filing false documents with the Federal Judge, Barbara Jones, stating "a sentence of anything less would not reflect the seriousness of the crime".



After recovering enough to finish my beer (a tough task) my mind took the surprisingly short journey from the criminal wrongdoings in the Worldcom case to the more 'everyday' ethical decisions we make within the workplace.

Ethics are about making choices that may not always feel like they give you the greatest direct benefit but are the "right" choices to make. They are the choices that are constantly demonstrated by 'role models', 'model citizens' and leaders and mentors we take guidance from. We have all heard of the Ten Commandments (but how many of us can name them – go on, try it!) and other phrases such as "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." Whether we follow these principles in our lives or not, one thing is clear to me - there is no such thing as workplace ethics; ethics are the same whether in the workplace or in our personal lives.

Unfortunately ethics are often thought of as something that is central to the private side of our lives and not to the business side. This is because business is often about enhancing profitability or shareholder value and not necessarily about what's really the right thing to do.

Take the above Worldcom example. Were the actions of Ebbers a good example of ethics? Clearly not! His actions paint a grim picture of what can happen when ethics are neglected and criminal behaviour takes over. If strong ethics been central to the leaders of Worldcom, or indeed Enron, HIH, Martha Stewart and any number of other organisations, there would have been no scandal.

Partly as a reaction to the many corporate scandals, the "Ethical Company" is becoming big business. To begin with, more and more businessmen and woman are now realizing that ethics cannot be left at home when leaving for work in the morning. Companies are incorporating ethics into their training and as a fundamental element of their business philosophy. University and Business School are applying the teaching of ethics within their curriculum. The end result is that not only will employees take note of the ethical nature of their business but so will their customers and the community at large.

A high level of ethical awareness should be in place within all of our business and it is the customer that should be considered first when it comes to ethical business practices. In the long run, a company will benefit greatly from a customer base that feels it is being treated fairly, truthfully and ethically.

Cheers

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