

11.3: Becoming an Ethical Professional

“‘Professionalism’ is the conduct, aims or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or professional person. It implies there is a quality of workmanship or service. But in reality, it’s more about ethical behavior in the workplace. Every organization knows that a professional and ethical reputation is the difference between success and failure, and they seek to keep those staff who are the most professional.”²⁰

Ethical professionals work for companies whose values align with their own. How do you evaluate a company to see whether it is a good occupational fit and one that will allow you to live your ethical values every day?

Finding the “Right Fit”

Ethics has become a major consideration for young people in their selection of work and career. The following observation about young British workers applies to their counterparts in the United States, as well: “There’s a quiet revolution happening. . . but it’s not about pay, hours or contracts. It’s a coup d’état led by the nation’s young, politically engaged jobseekers who demand employers enshrine values and ethics in their business model, not just profit.”²¹

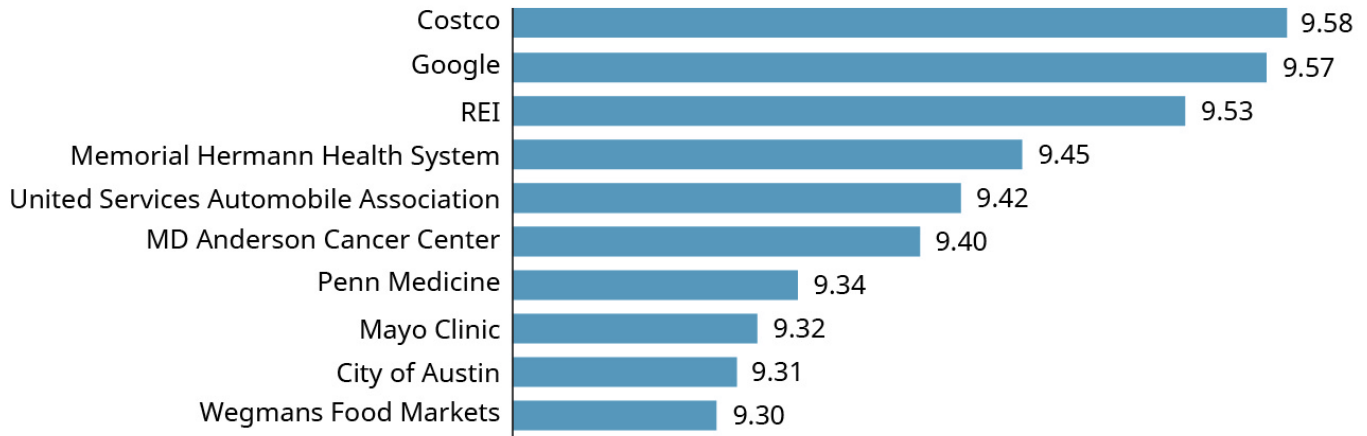
Many job seekers want to feel that what they are doing is not just making money but making a difference, that is, contributing to the company in unique ways that reflect their core values, conscience, and personality. They believe an individual has worth beyond his or her immediate work or position. Many modern companies thus try to give greater weight to the human cost of decisions and employee happiness. They know that, according to studies, employees in “companies that work to build and maintain ethical workplace cultures are more financially successful and have more motivated, productive employees.”²² The decision whether to transfer someone from Boston to Salt Lake City, for instance, would now likely include the employee from the beginning and consider the impact on family members and the employee’s future, in addition to the needs of the company.

This was not always the case, and there are several reasons for the change. The first is that satisfied employees are more productive and feel greater commitment to the organization.²³ Second, there are more options for job seekers, which gives them more freedom to choose a company for which to work.

“‘When we graduate from school, or whenever we are thinking about changing jobs, we are matching three things in deciding on our “vocation”—the job market (Are there jobs and opportunities?), our skills (Do I have the right skills to succeed in a particular job?) and our passions or beliefs (What do I want to do?) [with the concept that] worthwhile work can be found in working in a corporate culture that respects its workers and their personal lives. You may work where management is supportive and workers thrive and advance, but you can also find yourself working in a toxic environment where human dignity is torn down every day and responding to one’s family commitments is regarded as weaknesses.”²⁴

Many business journals report annually on how highly employees rate their work places (Figure 11.5). For example, you can consult *Fortune*’s annual list of “100 Best Companies to Work For,” which you can search by such factors as diversity, compensation, and paid time off. You can also consult specialized lists such as *Forbes*’ “100 Best Workplaces for Women” and *Black Enterprise*’s “50 Best Companies for Diversity.”

Best U.S. Employers as Ranked by Employees



Sources: McCarthy, Niall. "America's Best Large Employers." Statista. May 10, 2017. Kalogeropoulos, Demitrios. "Why Costco Doesn't Worry about Paying Workers \$13 an Hour." The Motley Fool. Apr 29, 2015.

Figure 11.5 With insurance coverage for part-time workers, higher-than-industry-average pay, and an overall employee satisfaction rating of 9.58 of a possible 10, Costco is often rated the best large employer to work for by *Forbes* and Statista. It is not just a generous employer; it is efficient, too, operating on a profit margin that meets the norm in the retail grocery business. (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

A third reason more companies are considering what truly makes employees happy is that even more than loyalty, employees appear to value the freedom and responsibility to act as moral agents in their own lives. A *moral agent* is someone capable of distinguishing right from wrong and willing to be held accountable for his or her choices.

The exercise of moral agency includes making a judgment about the alignment of personal and corporate conscience. Rather than jumping at the first job offer, moral agents assess whether the values expressed by the organization conform with their own, while recognizing that there is no perfect job. Even the most ethical organizations make mistakes, and even the most corrupt have managers and workers of integrity (Figure 11.6). This is why the "right fit" is more likely to be a job in which you can grow or that itself will change in a way that allows you to find greater meaning in it.



Figure 11.6 Abuse of power may not come as a surprise, but it should not be "business as usual." A firm should balance profitability with responsibility to society in a way that lifts the communities and neighborhoods of which we are part. (credit: modification of "Los Angeles Women's March (Unsplash)" by Samantha Sophia/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

It's Not About the Money—Is It?

You may follow a professional vocation that offers low pay or low status but yields nontangible rewards, such as nonprofit work, nursing, or teaching. Or you may find a position that pays a great deal and offers job security but leaves you feeling unhappy or unfulfilled. For some professionals, these might include law, accounting, dentistry, or anything else. The point is that occupations with high compensation and a certain stature do not always infuse their holders with the greatest psychological and emotional rewards, and it is different for each of us. In the best of all worlds, you might embark on a well-paying career that helps others or contributes a much-needed good or service to society. Finding such work is easier said than done, of course, because the aim of most jobs is not to help people find meaning or happiness. Where these do occur, they are often ancillary effects of work, whose real purpose is the profitability without which there would not be any jobs at all.

Also consider the gap between the purpose of the business and the purpose of the individuals in it. Except in a few startups, these purposes are not identical. Even artists, musicians, and independent practitioners who derive great meaning from their work are not immune to the frustrations over money or career that affect everyone else.

It has been estimated, however, that the amount of money needed to be happy is not actually that much, at least by Western standards, although it is well above the poverty line.²⁵ Most people find themselves somewhere in the middle in terms of satisfaction and pay. Finding the proper balance between the two for *you* is taking a step on the way to your growth as a professional. You will make that assessment not once but throughout your career as you move in and out of jobs. Even if it turns out to be the best decision of your life, the choice to work for a company because of its mission, leadership, or cultural values should be intentional and based on sufficient knowledge of the company and yourself. To be appreciated for your contributions in the workplace, to work with congenial colleagues, or to provide a product or service of which you are proud might rival money as your most intrinsic motivator at work. Studies attest to this and, as professionals of integrity, we must each decide for ourselves how strong a benefit salary alone is in the jobs we select.

Link to learning

Watch the [TEDx presentation “Money Can Buy Happiness”](#) about [money and its relationship to happiness](#) to learn more.

The Role of Ethical Top Leadership

As you consider your future path, perhaps leading toward a leadership role, keep in mind that perhaps the most effective way ethical behavior is learned in a company is through the modeling of that behavior by senior executives and others in leadership positions. This modeling sets what is known as “tone at the top.” Employees may already have a personal moral code when they join an organization, but when they see key figures in the workplace actually living out the ethical values of the company, they are more likely to follow suit and take ethics seriously. Leaders’ ethical behavior is especially important in emerging fields like artificial intelligence, where questions of safety, bias, misuse of technology, and privacy are raised daily.²⁶ It is not enough to offer codes of conduct, training, reporting, and review programs, no matter how thorough or sophisticated, if management does not adhere to or promote them. These are tools rather than solutions. The solutions come from leaders using the tools and showing others how to do the same. This takes practice, reinforcement, and collaboration at all levels of an organization. The result will be a culture of ethics that permeates the company from top to bottom.

Even leaders can falter, as the following box demonstrates. Also read the stories of ten ethical leaders in the appendix [Profiles in Business Ethics: Contemporary Thought Leaders](#).

CASES FROM THE REAL WORLD

Swanson’s Rule #1: Don’t Plagiarize

Bill Swanson, former CEO of the defense contractor Raytheon, became well known for publishing a booklet entitled *Swanson’s Unwritten Rules of Management*, which included thirty-three brief maxims for achieving success in business and cultivating a virtuous life in the corporate world.²⁷ The list included items like the famous “Waiter Rule,” which held that you can judge a person’s character by the way he or she treats those in subservient positions.

Swanson was hailed as a sage of modern business whose rules had saved companies like Czar Entertainment and Panera Bread from making bad hiring decisions.²⁸ Then it was discovered that he had plagiarized the list from several sources.²⁹ The booklet was discontinued and Swanson’s compensation and retirement package was modified downward.³⁰ As in similar cases of ethical lapse, however, the greatest damage was to his reputation, despite an otherwise distinguished 42-year career.³¹

Critical Thinking

- Does this case surprise you? Why or why not?
- What do you think is the effect on a company's employees of unethical behavior at the top?

Ethics matter not merely because acting unethically will end in a compliance problem or public relations nightmare but because ethics is a way of life, not a hurdle to overcome. Moreover, the benefit of ethical behavior can grow over time so that a company begins to attract other ethical professionals and develops a reputation for honesty, integrity, and dependability. In a globally competitive world, these are not inconsequential factors. In an ethical workplace, employee satisfaction creates more loyalty to the company and morale improves because employees and managers feel they are part of an effort they can be proud of. Business performance picks up in ways ranging from higher earnings per share to increased customer retention to more satisfied employees.

Consider the net income of two corporations that, as of 2018, have appeared on eleven consecutive annual lists of the world's most ethical companies as determined by the Ethisphere Institute (<https://ethisphere.com>). The first is United Parcel Service (UPS), founded in 1907, which earned net income of \$4.91 billion in 2017.³² The second is Xerox, founded in 1906, which earned net income of \$195 million in 2017.³³ Notice the staying power of these two companies, as well. Each is more than a century old and has a global presence. To test the consumer confidence these corporations evoke, consider your own opinion of how reputable they are. Ask your friends and family, too.

Again, employee loyalty, a positive work environment, and strong financial performance are not accidents; they are the result of intentional efforts on the part of leadership and board members who provide ethical vision and a plan for execution to all stakeholders. Ethical business need not be a zero-sum game with winners and losers; it can create situations in which everyone wins. Is there a more attractive environment for those just starting out in their careers? To be part of something profitable, responsible, and individually uplifting justifies all the work required to get there.

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