

17.11: Creating an Ethical Workplace

Learning Objectives

- Discuss how to create an ethical workplace

In an article for SHRM, Dori Meinert notes that “HR professionals are in a unique position to help build an ethical workplace culture because their involvement in hiring, training and evaluating employees allows them to influence their organizations at many levels.”^[1] Steven Olson, author and Director of Georgia State University’s Center for Ethics and Corporate Responsibility states that Human Resources personnel should be both guardians and champions of their organization’s ethical culture. In their role as guardians, they have a duty to protect employees, clients/customers and other stakeholders from unethical conduct. As champions, they practice and promote ethical behavior in daily operations.^[2]



In an article on her website, author and leadership development consultant Linda Fisher Thornton breaks the ethical culture-building task into the following 40 specific action items.^[3] This list serves as both an ethical culture assessment and a to-do list. Items that are in effect or true to your organization can be checked off; those that remain are culture-building opportunities. You can also modify the checklist to reflect degrees of attainment; that is, instead of a simple yes (check) or no, indicating the state of development/implementation or a target date. Finally, to add intention and incentive, include action items in relevant management evaluations.

Ethical Culture Checklist

1. Avoid Harm To a Wide Variety of Constituents
2. Balance Ethics With Profitability and Results
3. Carefully Build and Protect Trust
4. Choose the Ethical Path, Even if Competitors Aren't
5. Clarify What “Ethical” Means in the Organization
6. Clear Code of Ethics
7. Clear Messages About Ethics and Values
8. Commitment to Protecting the Planet
9. Consistently Demonstrate Care and Respect for People
10. Decision-Making Carefully Incorporates Ethics
11. Develop Leaders in How To Implement Proactive Ethical Leadership
12. Do Business Sustainably
13. Enforce Ethical Expectations
14. Embrace Corporate Social Responsibility
15. Engaging and Relevant Ethics Training and Messages (Not The Same Old Boring Stuff)
16. Ethical Actions Match Ethical Marketing
17. Frequent Conversations About Ethics (That Honor Work Complexity)
18. Full Accountability for Ethics At Every Level Including the C-Suite
19. High Degree of Transparency
20. Leaders Aware of Increasing Ethical Expectations
21. Leaders Stay Competent as Times Change
22. Open Leadership Communication and Invitation to Participate in Decisions
23. Open, Supportive Leadership
24. Performance Guidelines and Boundaries For Behavior
25. Performance System Fully Integrated With Ethical Expectations

26. Positive Ethical Role Models
27. Recognize and Praise Ethical Actions
28. Recognize and Punish Unethical Actions
29. Safe Space to Discuss Ethical Grey Areas
30. Set Ethical Boundaries
31. Strong Commitment to Improving Leadership and Culture
32. Take Broad Responsibility For Actions
33. Think Long Term About Our Impact
34. Treat Ethics as an Ongoing Priority
35. Treat People With Care
36. Use the Precautionary Principle
37. Use Systems Thinking to See the Big Picture
38. Values Mindset (Not A Compliance Mindset)
39. Welcome and Act on Feedback From Constituents
40. Willing to Do What it Takes to Become an Ethical Organization

? PRACTICE QUESTION

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/17299>



In addition to cultivating a positive ethical culture, it's important to be aware of ethical “danger zones” or high risk behaviors and situations. Meinert summarizes the six “danger signs” Olson identified:^[4]

- **Conflicting goals.** If goals or objectives are perceived as unrealistic, employees may feel they need to engage in unethical behavior to achieve them.
- **Fear of retaliation.** If reporting unethical behavior is punished, it's unlikely that employees will report violations.
- **Avoidance.** If unethical behavior isn't acknowledged and punished, it sends a message that ethics don't matter.
- **Rationalization.** The perception that “everybody's doing it” can may lead employees to think unethical behavior is “the way we do things.”
- **Lowered thresholds (slippery slope).** Unethical decisions tend to erode one's sense of standards, making it easier to commit additional acts.
- **Euphemisms.** Rephrasing questionable behavior—for example, “creative accounting”—in neutral terms.

As Meinert cautions: “a culture where misconduct is tolerated—or, worse, encouraged—could result in higher turnover, lower productivity and, ultimately, a diminished reputation and profitability.”^[5]

1. Meinert, Dori. “[Creating and Ethical Workplace](#).” Society for Human Resource Management. April 1, 2014. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↩
2. Ibid. ↩
3. Thornton, Linda Fisher. “[40 Ways to Build an Ethical Culture \(An Ethical To Do List\)](#).” Leading in Context. April 15, 2015. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↩
4. Meinert, Dori. “Creating and Ethical Workplace.” Society for Human Resource Management. ↩
5. Ibid. ↩

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