

Ethics Commentaries:

CHIEF INTEGRITY OFFICER IS TAILOR-MADE FOR PR

In the post-Enron era of corporate accountability business leaders must rebuild integrity and not think of it as 'sissy stuff.'

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The PR profession suffers from schizophrenia. On the one hand, PR people want to be at the table making decisions and guiding strategy with the boss in good times and bad. On the other hand, many want to serve as the guiding conscience of their organizations. So far the record for the profession in either arena is mixed. There have been some successes, some strikeouts, some absolute no hitters, and some MIAs.

As the business community enters the third year of relentless pulses of corporate scandal--primarily in the United States but also in other parts of the world--there is a business and organizational leadership environment that must focus on media persecution, government probes, and growing regulation. That's because business and other leaders have lost or ignored their responsibility to build and rebuild integrity as a workplace principle--a workplace guiding force.

Legislators continue to pass laws imposing extensive compliance requirements and an ever-increasing stack of regulations, restrictions and oversight requirements, in addition to internal and self-imposed monitoring. Virtually none of these can restore public, investor, employee, customer, or individual trust. Restoration of trust begins by focusing and rebuilding the most essential element of ethics: integrity.

Need to restore trust

The PR profession--if it chooses to--can play a vital role in restoring trust. Lawyers aggressively oversee the areas of compliance and codes of conduct. That's where the monitoring is, that's where the police are, and that's where the detection, deterrence, and disclosure of infractions occur.

A compliant organization is one where codes of conduct are observed and respected, where inspiration and motivation from leadership and management drive a desire to work with integrity in an ethical organization.

Restoring trust and maintaining an environment of integrity occurs in an organization along powerful tracks: the principles that guide daily processes and uncompromising vigilance.

Here are some examples of organizational principles:

- Our goal is integrity.
- We have constructive aspirations.
- We live a philosophy of integrity.
- We have a commitment to compliance and good conduct.
- We recognize those who achieve the best work in the best way.
- Our vigilance is driven by our principles, priorities, and our conscience.
- Everyone is committed to integrity.

Chief Integrity Officer is tailor-made for PR

Uncompromising vigilance means to clearly define, dramatically emphasize, and relentlessly enforce organizational values and beliefs. It is the unconditional commitment to prevent, detect, deter, or ultimately expose and learn from those activities that run counter to the ethics of the organization. A compliant organization, one with integrity, insists on and expects uncompromising vigilance from everyone.

Integrity is about setting guidelines in three areas: work, behavior, and relationships. These are concepts public relations practitioners can understand and dig into, and where they can provide extraordinary language and message leadership to their organizations.

Integrity is barely taught in business schools. It is something the boss doesn't really know much about. This is a perfect place for the PR practitioner to provide extraordinary help. Integrity is a key ingredient in constructive leadership. And if there's one thing public relations does in an organization, it's to counsel leaders.

‘Sissy stuff’

The problem is, and will continue to be for a while, that many bosses think integrity is "sissy stuff." They have a hard time seeing themselves down at the country club having their buddies in the locker room kid them about how they caved into the "panty-waists" at work who would rather sell out than sell up.

Years ago, one of my clients pled guilty to quite a number of felonies. The client, its lawyer and I met one day to discuss implementation of the Plea Agreement. After I finished explaining elements of the compliance and integrity programs that were required, the CEO looked at me and said, "Lukaszewski, whenever you're around it feels like Sunday School." I looked him in the eye and said, "Tom, when somebody has pled guilty to as many felonies as your company has, it seems to me a little Sunday school might be useful." He didn't laugh. He was gone in less than a year.

Being for integrity means standing up. Being for integrity means that an organization needs to unlearn inappropriate behaviors. It means learning how to handle ethical dilemmas and difficult issues. Integrity also teaches how to bring out the best in an organization--the best people, the best products, the best relationships, the best work, and the best practices.

If there ever was a growth area for PR--one in which most of us absolutely, positively fit--it is this third crucial aspect of ethical development: integrity - behaving with honor and expecting everyone else to do the same. If there's one lesson these past three years is teaching us, it is that without integrity, nothing else matters. •