Can ethical behavior be taught?

By Stephen M. Paskoff, Esq.

Given the wave of ethical lapses splashed across headlines, it’s no wonder that I’m regularly asked to speak to professional groups about whether and how ethics and professionalism can be taught. The recent scandals in the military are a particularly hot topic. I get questions that start out something like this: “Every military person I know is focused on values like honor and ethics. It’s part of the culture. If those institutions can’t get it right…well, it seems like ethics just can’t be taught. Can it?”

My response to this question is always the same, no matter who is asking. “Yes, ethics can be taught. The real question is whether you’re making sure it is learned.”

I then go on to explain that it’s relatively easy to put employees through training on ethics. A threshold consideration is whether the training is accurate and engaging. That’s the easy part. But there’s even more to consider. It’s the organization’s responsibility to make sure that the lessons are reinforced and sustained because that’s the only way that true learning can occur. That’s where learning often falls short—it’s delivered as a once-a-year event rather than an ongoing day-to-day experience.

If you are trying to teach ethics in your organization and want to make sure it is learned and practiced, here are some tips to consider.

Is the learning engaging?

Many learning initiatives are based on delivering online modules to students who take them at their desks at their convenience. The reality, however, is that many students taking these courses are busy multitasking. They check their email, answer the phone, respond to texts, or surf the web while the programs run in the background. No matter how good the content is, there is very little that can be obtained through this delivery system.
It’s easy to figure out what topics need to be taught, but that doesn’t solve the problem of determining what will capture the attention of students. Lecturing a group of adults—or having them sit through check-the-box online training—is often both tedious and wasteful. Most students, no matter what their age, quickly lose interest when flooded with facts, statistics, and lessons that they would just as soon read. Instead, base your training around real-world scenarios and choices that your employees are likely to encounter. Create situations where they get to practice using new words and new behaviors.

**Identify the most important takeaways.**

I’ve seen ethics training programs that are incredibly complex, covering the intricacies of sentencing guidelines, ethical standards, rules, policies, and the like. These programs communicate information but don’t give direction. At best, they are designed for lawyers not those responsible for day-to-day decisions. Most students can retain only a small amount of what they read or hear and will soon forget broad-based chunks of disparate informational bits.

Remember that you’re training employees not creating ethicists. A limited number of short, clear messages that address specific behaviors and explain how to get help and handle ambiguous situations will stay with people far longer than detailed explorations of the intricacies of obscure regulations. Focus on a few foundational principles that people can apply to most situations—those are the kinds of lessons that are more likely to be to be remembered and applied.

**Clearly explain the consequences of improper/unethical conduct.**

Make sure your training shows how unethical behavior affects many people, not just person who is misbehaving. As Leon Panetta wrote while Secretary of Defense, “…any behavior that negatively impacts our ability to perform that mission is unacceptable.” This principle must be embedded in training. Senior leaders in particular need to see how what they view as private behavior has a damaging impact on others and mission effectiveness. Otherwise, they may violate standards assuming what they do affects them and no one else.

**Don’t treat the training as a “punishment” or a check-the-box requirement.**

In many organizations, training is rolled out via emails that direct participants to take a required course by a certain date. There is usually no clear connection between such emails (or other directives) from the participant’s manager/leader and the actual learning content. Quite often ethics training is announced with negative messages such as: “get this done”; “it’s a pain, but we all have to do it”; “if you want that bonus, get through it”; “you’ve done something wrong and now you have to take this training”; or “don’t worry about it, just get it finished.”

Obviously, such messaging undermines whatever value is being delivered. Messages about ethics training should convey that this is something that is important to your organization (and why). Completing the training should be seen as a positive move towards becoming a fully engaged employee or leader.

**Senior leaders must play an active role.**

This is the most important guideline. If your senior leaders do not treat ethics as a requirement of doing business—not just a nice-to-have—neither will your staff. Also, training can’t be seen as a staff or lower-level responsibility, or something that can be dismissed as soon as the class ends. Senior leaders must be involved in keeping key messages alive after classes end. That includes actions such as:

- Being the first speaker at every training event to explain the importance of class and its relation to “mission effectiveness.”
- Addressing ethical issues regularly in discussions and meetings with their direct reports.

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Modeling important behaviors, talking about them, speaking up when they see problems, and holding themselves and others accountable for rule violations.

Applying the rules to everyone, at all levels of the organization. Leaders must be prepared to deal with anyone who abuses ethical standards, even if it is one of their own. If leaders fail to follow what they are taught and hold others accountable, the messages they send will be that ethical behavior is not important.

Is there a plan to sustain learning?
No matter how learning is transmitted, it must be reinforced. In addition to having leaders take an active reinforcing role, you should have a plan to
1) Communicate information regularly, not just as a one-time event and
2) Have some way of refreshing learning and holding people accountable for key lessons.
Without these elements, it is likely the learning will not stick over an extended period of time.

Final thoughts
In one of the sessions I recently delivered, a senior executive at a major military contractor said, “Well, it’s complicated to do all that stuff, and I’m not sure how we would get it done.” My response to her was, “Your organization has built some of the finest military applications in the history of the world. Are you telling me this type of initiative is more complicated than that?” After a moment, she shook her head and said, “No.”

Ethical principles can be taught, with the right learning method, and sustained by having a strong plan in place. The key question, however, is: How important is this initiative to the leaders who manage the entire scope of the enterprise? They are the ones ultimately responsible for understanding and conveying this message to their teams in a positive light and investing the resources and commitment needed to build ethical workplaces.