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The things leaders do, unwittingly and otherwise, that harm ethical culture, Part 1

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This is Part 1 of a two-part series. Part 2 will be published in the September 2019 issue of ethikos

Organizations spend money, time, and effort on ethics messaging. From videos to sites to desk trinkets to booklets to pens to pads, the goal is to get out that message, “Be ethical.” However, the repetition and expense of these physical and tech efforts is too often countermanded by leaders’ behaviors. Experience in working with organizations struggling to recover from or hoping to prevent ethical lapses has been an eye-opener. Even the savviest of managers do things, however unwittingly, that harm their ethical cultures. Herewith, a look at some of the leader behaviors that affect their organizations’ ethical cultures.

The big message: Whom they hire, fire, and discipline

Often, the most powerful messages about an organization’s ethics come from leaders’ human resources (HR) decisions. Whom we hire, whom we fire, whom we discipline, and how that discipline proceeds (if it does at all) serves to reveal the values and priorities of leadership. At one organization, two of the officers, who appeared in the video introduction for the company’s ethics training emphasizing the importance of ethics at their company, ended up involved in serious ethical lapses. The longer the two officers stayed at the company, the sillier the ethics training looked. Even with the officers’ introductions removed from the video, employees remembered, and the irony of their continuing presence in the company was impossible to reconcile with the messages in that training. Employee cynicism about ethics had taken hold.

In another experience, a senior executive misrepresented to management the readiness of a new billing system. When the system crashed at the moment of its live run, those relying on his word of full readiness saw their misplaced trust. The organization struggled far too long with the officer’s conduct, because he had been with the company for years and was close to retirement. Incompetence and/or his lack of candor were not the issues; friendship and likability were. The messages conveyed throughout the culture? Telling the truth is not really necessary. It may be best to just not offer up bad news. Let it go, and you can survive, even when you know about the problems.

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