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ARTICLE OF INTEREST

A 'PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE' APPROACH TO ETHICS

By Christopher Bauer

How can corporate executives learn to see potential ethics problems far enough in advance to deal with them *before* they become the catastrophic financial, legal, and public relations nightmares we see so often? A different approach to ethics - a 'preventive maintenance' approach - is required.

The reality is that most executives - and, frankly, most ethics training programs - overlook the fact that the vast majority of ethics violations have their roots in personal matters that have little or nothing to do with knowledge of the ethics code or corporate code of conduct. Instead, violations typically have to do with personal wishes and values 'rubbing' with the mandates of ethical or legal behavior and that 'rub' goes either unseen or unaddressed until it is too late.

To combat this, a number of initiatives are imperative. In addition to working to assure corporate cultures in which ethically-attuned decision-making is modeled and rewarded, there also needs to be a shift towards helping employees - from the front lines up through senior management - take personal responsibility for 'walking the talk' of ethics. This requires providing yourself, and the rest of your organization, with the climate, concepts and tools necessary to make good on those initiatives.

In the required climate, corporate culture is changed from supporting the existing 'reactive' response to ethical challenges to a focus on the active, effective prevention of problems. The primary roles of compliance and audit departments need to be reconceptualized as consultants and back-up systems and not the front line effort to deal with issues of ethics.

Just as you would (hopefully!) never wait to see your car's oil light come on before adding oil to the engine, why would you not make every reasonable effort to develop a 'preventive maintenance' approach to your corporation's values and ethics?

To help begin the development of a preventive maintenance approach to your corporation's ethics, starting with yourself, here is a small sampling of ideas to consider.

Values and Ethics

Our behavior is governed entirely by our personal wishes and values. In other words, every choice we make is based - consciously or not - on answering the question, "What is the most important thing for me to do right now?" As obvious as that sounds, the fact is that few of us take the time to consciously examine what our true values actually are.

For example, do you value honesty over all? Or do you value a lack of conflict over anything else? Do you place your retirement account at the top of your list of priorities governing your business plan or maybe having a certain amount of time to pursue some particular interest of

yours? No answer here is intrinsically right or wrong although it's tough to argue with 'honesty over all else'.

The point of all this is that knowing what your wishes and values are will help you identify the areas where your judgment might most easily be compromised in an effort to accommodate those values and wishes. This type of information, in turn, is at the heart of a 'preventive maintenance' approach to ethical practice.

In other folksier words, our wishes and values are 'driving the car' so we better know them well enough to be good navigators for them!

Do you take the time for yourself - and support your subordinates taking the time - to consider both personal and shared values?

Why Would Someone Practice Unethically?

As stated previously, most ethics violations have nothing to do with a lack of knowing the ethics code. So what *are* the causes? The vast majority of ethics violations are built from a pretty short list of mostly benign or even positive sounding personal wishes. Look beneath the rhetoric and legalese used in either trying to justify or adjudicate ethics violations, and that list is pretty much made up of the following few statements:

1. "I just want to get ahead in life."
2. "I just want more time for _____."
3. "I just want to be liked/respected/left alone by _____."
4. "I just want to be a good breadwinner/employee/colleague/associate/partner."

You will notice there is not much you can argue against any of these and, in fact, they mostly sound pretty upstanding. In and of themselves, each has the ability to move us in many more positive ways than negative ones. The fact remains, though, that each can be the underpinning of unethical practices.

Does this mean that we need to worry if we (or others) have any of the above aspirations? Certainly not. In fact, most of us would have reason to worry if we or our subordinates didn't have some or all of the above! What is important is to spot any negative pressures resulting from the above values and wishes (i.e. the urge to misrepresent facts, not respond to the inappropriate actions of others, etc.) as early as possible so as to be able to clearly and consciously direct our behavior to the proper side of the ethics line.

No matter how tough the decision, we are always ultimately responsible for our behavioral choices as well as for the predictable consequences of those choices.

When you look in the mirror - or when you address your company - are you prepared to assert the need to build the strength of your brand through the use of ethical practices rather than in spite of them? Do you feel confident that you, both personally and as a management team, know how to do that in order to effectively lead your company in that direction?

How Do You Spot a Conflict in its Early Stages?

By paying attention! Ethical practices require making clear, conscious decisions all day and every day about why we are making the choices we make. To not be conscious about our behavior begs for blindly, if unintentionally, moving beyond appropriate behavioral and ethical boundaries. It is critically important to pay attention to "red flags" for ethical violations.

What can you look for? The easiest red flags to look for are the things we say to ourselves about why we are doing what we do. More specifically, look/listen for how you talk to yourself



about making questionable (or unquestionably inappropriate!) behavioral choices. Pay attention anytime you find yourself or someone else thinking:

1. "It's such a small thing, who'll notice anyhow?"
2. "It's such a small thing, it really won't hurt anybody."
3. "I don't feel comfortable doing this but, if this is what it takes to get ahead (via money/work/promotion/prestige), I guess I'd better do it."
4. "Everybody else does it. So why not?"
5. "Geeez, I hope _____ doesn't find out about this!"
6. "Well, _____ is in charge here and s/he told me to do it so I guess I'd better do it."
7. "I better do this so I don't let _____ down."
8. "If I do this, at least I can get _____ off my back."

Each of these is a sign of entering the 'slippery slope' zone as far as ethical conduct. None of these, of course, automatically means that some type of violation has occurred or that one is getting ready to occur. However, the moment you become aware of any of these rationalizations, a 'preventive maintenance' approach requires that you immediately examine your behavior or that of the individual making the statement. The goal of doing so is to make sure that you have not set yourself up to cross to the wrong side of an ethical mandate or to let some else's ethics lapse go unaddressed.

Remember, ethics violations come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. Once one moves over the line, don't be fooled into thinking that a "little" violation is necessarily any less harmful than a big one. Besides, once you cross the line, you have set the stage for progressively more inappropriate practice. Why? Because once you have justified it to yourself, you have set the scene to justify more. It's simply human nature.

Taking the opportunity to learn how to improve your self-monitoring will be a subtle but significant step towards your personally 'walking the talk' of improved ethics. However, effective self-monitoring is but one of several essential components of the preventive maintenance approach. Among the other essential components are improved behavioral self-regulation, successful articulation of core corporate values, effective communication of those core values both throughout the corporation and - in actions as much as in words - to customers, and the successful transition from a concept of ethics based entirely on suppressing certain behaviors to a concept of ethics as empowering employees at all levels to 'do the next right thing'.

Christopher Bauer ("The Ethics Risk Reducer") is a clinical psychologist by training who has over twenty-five years of experience as a speaker, trainer, executive coach, and consultant. His primary focus is on showing businesses how to reduce their risk of ethics violations while making 'walking the talk' of ethics a central component of maximizing the bottom line. Information on his ethics seminars can be found at www.bauerethicsseminars.com and information on his consulting can be obtained by contacting him directly either by email at chris@bauercoaching.com or by phone at (615) 385-3523.