

*We're given a code to live our lives by.
We don't always follow it, but it's still there.*

– Gary Oldman

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Ethics Challenge Number One:

Knowing What's Right

6 places to look

To be sure, when you discuss the subject of ethics, you're talking about challenges. And ...

the first challenge is *knowing* the right thing to do.

Most of us were exposed to the difference between right and wrong at an early age. We learned (or at least heard) that honesty is good, lying is bad; earning is good, stealing is bad; having manners is good, intentionally hurting others is bad. These lessons, and others like them – often delivered in the form of preaching – were the guidelines we used in separating good from bad, right from wrong. They are what helped form the essence of our individual characters.

As we traveled life's journey from adolescence to adulthood – from school to the working world – we found ourselves exposed to more rights and wrongs ... and a bunch more (and larger) temptations to test our character, our beliefs, and our values.

Growing up, or at least growing older, has also resulted in an up-close and personal familiarity with what used to be nothing more than another crayon in the box: **the color gray**.

No, we're not referring to hair color. We're talking about issues ... gray issues. And if you've been around for a while, you know exactly what we mean.

The fact is, the older we get, the less things seem so clearly black and white. Sure, those binary points do exist in our worlds, but so do the areas in between – the gray zones where the line between “should” and “shouldn't” gets blurry. Sometimes what's right is obvious ... sometimes it's not. And when it's not, we need to rely on strong sets of guidelines to point the way and keep us on track.

Therefore, in order to *know* what's right ...



Let the LAWS be your guide!

There are two basic categories of laws that apply to you at work. The first contains those common, every day, “everybody oughta know” restrictions against things like theft, assault, slander, reckless driving, etc., that you knew (or should have known) before you were hired. We call these “no brainers” because you’d pretty much have to be brainless to violate them intentionally.

The second category of laws is comprised of those that relate to business in general – plus those unique to your industry and your specific profession. These include things like antitrust, copyright, purchasing and procurement, EEOC, material handling, and waste disposal laws, as well as OSHA and SEC regulations.

There are two specific “to remember’s” about laws:

1. Ignorance of a law is not an acceptable excuse for breaking it. So, make sure you’re informed of ALL the legalities that pertain to you and your job.
2. Focus not only on the the actual words and provisions of the laws, but also on the probable intentions behind them. Looking exclusively at the former often leads to “loopholing” – manipulating the law by using technicalities and omissions to justify actions.

Let the **RULES** and **PROCEDURES** be your guide!

Every organization has them, and every employee is responsible for knowing and following them. They're policies and procedures – “the company rules.” They pick up where laws leave off, and they exist to ensure appropriate and consistent behavior throughout the business.

What are your rules and procedures? Do you have a “Code of Ethics?” Where can you find them? How well do you know them? How consistently do you follow them? Rules, procedures, and protocols are key guides for sorting out what's right. Abide by them and you take a huge step on the journey to business ethics.

Let **SHARED VALUES** be your guide!

As human beings, we all have beliefs and principles – values that shape our perspectives, our characters, and (hopefully) our actions. Experience has taught *us* that, with few exceptions, these values are noble and well-intended. And they typically include concepts like **honesty**, **fairness**, **respect**, and **responsibility**.

The same is true for organizations. Whether your business has articulated its beliefs through written value statements or relies on common sense “the way we do things around here” protocols, organizational values do exist ... and chances are they're pretty close to what's important to you, personally. These “shared values” provide yet another set of guidelines for knowing the right thing(s) to do.



“Let YOUR CONSCIENCE be your guide!”

Have one of those nagging, annoying, guilt-producing little people who sits on your shoulder and questions things you’re thinking about doing or actions you’re planning to take? GREAT! That’s your conscience – your personal “values police.” And you need to pay attention to it. Why? Because if something *feels* wrong, there’s a good chance it IS wrong.

Like Jiminy Cricket in the Disney classic *Pinocchio*, that little person whispering in your ear is the sound of ethics, and people who ignore it (or have lost it altogether) are at a serious disadvantage in today’s world. They’re the ones you read about in the paper – they’re the ones to be pitied and avoided – they’re the ones that just might end up making your next set of license plates (if you get our drift)!

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

– Edmund Burke



Let your PROMISES be your guide!

“My word is my bond.” Corny cliché? Some think so. The heart of ethics and integrity? We *know* so!

Yes, another guideline for knowing what’s right are your promises – the commitments you and your organization make to customers, co-workers, vendors, shareholders, and your community. When you say you’ll do something, YOU have to deliver. When you take on a task or project that has a deadline – or accept a higher level position that comes with new responsibilities – YOU have to deliver. When you promise a certain level of quality or service, YOU have to deliver. And each time you deliver, you must do it with integrity.

And finally ...



Let your HEROES be your guide!

Look around. Who are your ethics heroes ... your role models for integrity? Undoubtedly, you’ve encountered a “Mr./Ms. Ethics” – someone whose commitment to doing the right thing is uncompromising. Follow their lead! When in doubt, ask yourself: “What would my role model do?” And, if your lucky enough to know or work with that person, ask him or her.