

Five factors for maintaining ethical health

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Business ethics are like health: We only miss them when they start to fail on us, even though we should take care of them day in, day out.

The scandal surrounding dioxin found in animal feed in Germany in late 2010 is just one of many food-related scandals to have hit Europe in recent years. As always, one can blame inefficient oversight for not detecting the contamination. But why were fatty acids destined for industrial purposes used to feed animals in the first place?

As in so many similar cases, the answer lies in a decision, or omission, in a human act, be it mistaken or not, conscious or not, blameworthy or not.

In any case, one of the characteristics of decisions is that once taken, control over their consequences is lost. In this case, those consequences could have been fatal.

Dealing with complex dilemmas

[In their book, Joan Fontrodona](#), Manuel Guillén and Alfredo Rodríguez shed light on a broad range of ethical issues and help us to identify the right decisions in complex dilemmas.

While some schools of thought have reduced the meaning of business ethics to the development of corporate social responsibility, their book advocates business ethics in their fullest sense.

For these authors, this does not mean having a document with the rules clearly spelled out, but rather something much more ambitious: to create the conditions for people to do and be

their best.

In order to reach this state of virtue, the company must define its mission and plan how to transmit it throughout the organization. For this to happen, company leaders have to encourage the change toward ethical quality.

Five keys to excellence

There are five basic elements to consider in transforming a company into an ethically healthy organization.

1. **Vision.** Spell out the ethical position that your company is striving for. One option is to take a legalist approach, and therefore adopt measures that abide by the full letter of the law. Or, you might prefer to establish a deontological system of codes that stresses the ethical comportment of the members of the organization. Alternatively, you could establish a system focused on encouraging employees and management to drive for excellence, and by doing so, foster virtuous habits.
2. **A plan for change.** A road map allows for measuring progress and preventing disorder. If you opt for the deontological approach, strict controls in processes will need to be established. The search for excellence, meanwhile, requires non-stop involvement and a strong spirit of dedication to service.
3. **Motivation.** Incentives help prevent people from losing interest. In order to overcome resistance to change, you will need to get the members of an organization closely involved and on your side. If you have opted for the deontological model, you will need to use a carrot-and-stick approach to keep everyone in line. Conversely, if your emphasis is on individual excellence, then simply contributing to the well-being of others should be motivation enough for your employees and management.
4. **Resources.** In order to ensure a real, lasting change in ethics and avoid frustration, you must invest. Doing so, however, might require overcoming the reluctance of some members of management who are less convinced of the need for change.
5. **Development of competence and skills.** The organization must also develop the human capacities necessary to deliver real, lasting change. At a basic level, it could encourage the habit of providing correct information, while at a higher level it could foment virtues such as humility and strength.

A complete vision

The authors call for a paradigm shift with anthropological roots, one that gives priority to the principles of the company and the personal responsibility of its executives.

They warn of the manifold dangers of a business culture that focuses too much on short-term profit, while also highlighting the limits of an overtly rule-based system that risks alienating and disempowering employees.

In their place, the authors advocate an approach that takes account of the full complexity of human beings and their work in organizations. What is needed, they say, is an anthropological model capable of offering an integrated approach to all the complex ethical issues that arise in the world of organizations.

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