Every company needs an ethics strategy

Develop and implement a clear ethics strategy to prevent ethical issues becoming a problem. By Cynthia Schoeman

The goal of sound ethics and an ethical culture is shared by most organisations. However, building and maintaining an ethical organisation is often made more difficult because the management of ethics is not prioritised. Ethics is frequently only addressed reactively, after a problem has occurred, or in an ad hoc way.

A clear ethics strategy is needed to better enable the organisation to realise its ethical goals. Ideally, this strategy needs to include six focus areas.

1. Setting the ethical standards
   The ethical standards of an organisation need to be clearly defined via the company’s values and rules, including the code of conduct and policies. These values should identify the desired behaviour, which should be translated into acceptable or unacceptable behaviours in the company’s code of conduct and supporting policies.

2. Setting up an ethics committee
   The Committee, a sub-committee of the Ethics Group, is responsible for managing the ethics standards of the organisation.

3. Building ethical awareness
   Ethics awareness is a powerful approach in the pursuit of improved workplace ethics, particularly with regard to reducing unethical behaviour. Visible policies promote a good example of the impact of awareness. The private security firm that patrols the neighbourhood may not result in many crimes being committed, but their regular presence serves to raise ethical awareness and, in doing so, acts as a deterrent to crimes being committed in that area. The same can be said of ethical awareness in the workplace.

4. Measuring and monitoring ethical status
   The measurement and monitoring of a company’s ethical status is also a crucial part of an effective ethics strategy. The data that if you can’t measure something, you can’t manage it applies to ethics as much as any other area of a business. A positive ethical status lends itself to many benefits, among others, for customer retention, corporate reputation, and brand equity, while a negative status can be very damaging in many respects. A comprehensive method to do this is to conduct an ethics survey. The survey results will identify the most important ethical issues requiring attention and what action to take to improve ethics in the organisation.

5. Taking action
   Improving workplace ethics is optimally addressed by a dual approach which includes actions to improve ethical behaviour and actions to reduce unethical behaviour (such as increasing revenue and reducing costs) addressed separately.

6. Maintaining an ethical culture
   Building an ethical workplace and reaching a high ethical status are significant achievements. The task of maintaining an ethical culture eliminates the need for ongoing attention to the steps outlined above.

Together these focus areas constitute a sound strategy that can realise the organisation’s ethical goals. It also marks the difference that distinguishes an ethical organisation from others, which, in the competitive world of business, is a particularly valuable outcome.

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