

IS YOUR HOUSE



IN ORDER?

It's weird how parents instinctively teach their children right from wrong and expect them to grow up with these lessons, but this isn't usually referred to as teaching our kids ethics. Ethical conduct in the workplace is something you don't hear about in the boardroom or in the corridors, but it seems to be expected from employees. But, are employees being ethical in their day-to-day tasks and activities? Are you, as an employer or manager, monitoring it? In order to understand the dynamics of ethical conduct in the workplace, I took some time to speak to MD of Ethics Monitoring & Management Service Cynthia Schoeman.

By: **SIBONGILE GURA**, assistant editor, People Dynamics

As employees and employers, we consciously know what ethical conduct is, especially in the workplace. Are we behaving in an ethical way and making ethical decisions? Cynthia Schoeman, MD of Ethics Monitoring & Management Service, points out that most companies would want their staff to behave ethically in the workplace.

Truth be told, a lot of companies can't afford *not* to be ethical in the way they conduct business. However, very few of them have structures in place to ensure they are running an ethical organisation and that their employees know, understand and implement these ethical standards. Like everything else in business, this responsibility lies with the employer, but getting others to act ethically can be a challenge; another person can't be forced to act ethically.

Typically, the company's ethical standards would include, among other things, a code of conduct. It might also include an Ethics Policy. These standards should be aligned with and support the company's goals, vision and mission.

It sounds straightforward, so why does it seem as though businesses are failing at this? According to Schoeman, ethics presents an area where HR can engage in and contribute to strategic issues in the company – above the regular administrative functions. “And the powers that be are heightened by the fact that they don't put in the time and effort needed to discover

the insight of ethics. It is one thing for an employer to tell you what's right and wrong, but it's another thing for them to take the time out to actively influence their employees' ethical choices, and this is a key role that both HR professionals and company leaders need to take up. The workshops themselves should be focused on influencing employees' ethical choices positively.”

In most cases, this is easier said than done, but once company leaders understand the importance of being ethical in the way business is conducted, they will begin to see the benefits. But the buck starts and ends with company leaders. The systematic and proactive management of ethics in the workplace must be prioritised.

The employer needs to place ethics front and centre. As an employer, you must make sure your employees are ethically aware of their actions, and this can be achieved through adequate training and communication. “One thing that organisations don't get is that ethics make business sense; by effectively monitoring ethics, decision-makers will be able to see the organisation's strengths and weaknesses.” Despite all this, there is still a lack of sound proactive ethical management in a large number of companies, even if they are legally required to monitor their ethical status.

These benefits do not really originate from reporting on ethics; they derive from the regular, accurate assessment of ethics.

By effectively doing this, you could:

- Have a holistic view of your business' ethics/ethical status;
- Have valuable management information that you can act on, for example, to improve ethics;
- Know your employees' experiences and perspective of ethics;
- Identify your company's ethical strengths and weaknesses; and
- Have accurate data on hand that supports your risk management policies and highlights areas where you might need to pay more attention.

Where do companies start? Are there tools out there to help businesses achieve this mandate?

In order to get an accurate assessment of their ethical status, companies must monitor all their employees. To achieve this, a tool is required that is user-friendly and offers anonymity. The Ethics Monitor is a Web-based ethics survey that serves as a valuable tool to measure, monitor, manage and accurately report on organisational ethics.

Companies need to have an ethical management system in place that includes operational ethics as well, says Schoeman. This will help to monitor whether or not their business is ethical. However, having a system in place means nothing if it isn't put into practice, she adds. These are all important factors when companies embark on the journey to “get their house in order”. 

FACT BOX:

The pillars of the ethics management system

*Cynthia Schoeman uses these pillars with her clients, which she describes in her latest book, **Ethics Can**:*

- » There needs to be leadership commitment.
- » Ethics must be included in the business goals.
- » A proper standard/policy must be in place

that is current, relevant and user-friendly.

- » There must be ethics awareness within companies. This includes training and communication.
- » Business ethics must be assessed, monitored and reported properly.

