

FEATURED ARTICLES

DEVELOPING ETHICAL LEADERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



We are imperfect simply by being human. We make mistakes. We can be irresponsible. At some point every one of us has done something we are not proud of.

Sometimes we don't even think twice - a simple example is driving over the speed limit when we are late to get to an important meeting on time. So often expediency overrides morality and we justify to ourselves why a course of action was necessary - this time. Repeatedly over time this gets easier.

Leaders that are recognised for their high ethical standards are human, like everybody else. They also make mistakes. However, they respond differently because they have learnt how.

How do you ensure your organisation's future leaders have the necessary preparation to respond appropriately to complex situations and ethical dilemmas? Or will they at some point

find themselves thrust into situations they are not equipped to handle? In today's highly complex world of business, without adequate resources to manage the challenges they will face, managers can make more mistakes than necessary. This could not only compromise their own future, the systemic impact of a poor decision can have disastrous consequences for other employees, the company and its shareholders. The local and international news is full of examples that spring readily to mind.

Part of the problem of ethical behaviour comes from defining what is 'right', and this can depend on whom you ask. It's therefore important to clearly define ethical behaviours for your organisation, that are aligned with its purpose statement, values and guiding beliefs. Some other factors to consider in developing ethical leaders include:

- Paying attention to the culture of the organisation – this will be driven from the top. Does your senior leadership set the example of living the values on a day by day basis and provide support for others to do likewise?
- Assessing the levels of trust in the organisation and prioritising this where necessary. Low levels of trust internally are likely to become replicated externally. One of the hardest things to do is re-build trust once it has been destroyed.
- Through coaching or mentorship help your managers gain awareness of their own mindsets, assumptions and limitations
- Expose them to complexity and stretch them through business simulations or working alongside more senior leaders in handling real life situations
- Encourage them to think systemically and consider how to add the most value for multiple stakeholders rather than focus on individuals or functional silos.
- Consider the broader consequences of decisions: a good question to ask when faced with a difficult decision is how their family would feel when reading of their decision through a social media broadcast that's gone viral – would they be proud or ashamed?
- Teach them not only how to cope with ethical problems as they happen – importantly also to prevent them happening in the first place by identifying trigger situations.
- Ethical leading takes courage and conviction. It means doing the right thing, even when it is not popular or easy. By recognising the features of poor decision making, learning how to resist requests to act unethically, and understanding how to set the example, managers can reduce the chances of unethical actions, and become role models for other employees.

Resources:

- The SABPP 2015 book *Ethical Competence in HR Practice* highlights ethical issues in the various tasks of HRM. The SABPP has also developed a series of half-day Ethics Workshops, including: *Fundamentals of HR Ethics, Organisational Ethics and Courageous Leadership*. Visit <http://sabpp.co.za/sabpp-ethics-toolkit> for more details.
- Plinio, A., Young, J., & Lavery, L. (2010). The state of ethics in our society: A clear call for action. *International Journal of Disclosure and Governance*, 7, 172-197. Retrieved from <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jdg/journal/v7/n3/full/jdg201011a.html>
- A useful resource for learning more about global best practices in ethics and compliance is the Ethisphere Institute: <https://ethisphere.com>

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A large white Twitter bird logo is centered on a dark blue background. Below the logo, the text 'TWITTER/SABPP JOIN THE DISCUSSION' is written in white, with a white Twitter bird icon to the left of the text. A red diagonal line runs across the bottom of the blue area.