

Building Higher Trust 83 Trust and Ethics

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Elevate
Rochester

CELEBRATING ETHICAL CULTURES

It is pretty obvious that trust and ethics are related. You may not have thought about the relationship in a conscious way. This article shines a light on that. It offers an example of how a community can change ethical conditions for the better.

Ethical problems reduce trust

I cannot think of a single ethical scandal that did not result in a loss of trust in some area. When there is an ethical dilemma, there are a variety of solutions to consider. In choosing between them, one major factor is how each solution would impact trust. Ethical issues always reduce trust.

The reverse is not true

There can be situations that result in lower trust that do not involve ethics at all. Trust is defined by minute transactions like the wording of an email, or rolling of eyes in a meeting.

We all are aware that when trust is damaged, it takes a lot of effort to repair it. I have described a process to regain lost trust in another article. [Building Higher Trust 68 Restoring Lost Trust](#). The good news is that with care, it is usually possible to repair trust to a higher state. We must understand that not all ethical problems are the same.

Situational ethics

The challenge with ethics is that the existence of an ethical problem is situational. The severity will vary depending on the people involved. For example, we would all agree that stealing is unethical. I can come up with a scenario where taking the property of another person might be perfectly ethical.

Example with books

Suppose you are a trash collector. In a recycle bin there are some books that you might like to read. The books do not belong to you, but they were discarded. You feel it is appropriate to salvage the books for your reading pleasure. I suspect most readers would agree that it is ethical to take the books.

Killing another person

Killing another person is not an ethical thing to do. We would all agree there are circumstances where killing another person is the correct thing. In a time of war, killing the enemy is often the objective of a mission. If a thief tries to kill you, you have a right to kill the robber to save yourself.

In extreme cases, it is easy to see how some things are unethical. For example, what Bernie Madoff did to his investors was clearly unethical. Like many ethical scandals, the pathway to egregious actions may have started out as legal actions. He then got deeper and deeper into illegal and unethical actions.

Hard to recognize the slippery slope

Sometimes people find a slippery slope because if they can do X today, then doing X+1 tomorrow seems reasonable. It does not take long before they are doing things that are clearly not appropriate. They may not even be aware of the erosion of ethical standards that is going on. If someone has the courage to speak up about it, the problem can be stopped before doing more damage.

Having the ability to point out apparent lapses in ethics requires low fear from a culture of high trust. We call this low fear, psychological safety.

The value of psychological safety

Few organizations have been able to achieve true psychological safety. Those that have achieved it have a significant advantage. It is where leaders do not punish people when they point out an issue. If they say something about a pending action that does not seem right, it will trigger praise, not punishment.

That is why true trust is such an important way to prevent unethical actions. When there is high trust, there is usually low fear about telling the truth to superiors. People know that by raising a potential ethical dilemma, they are really doing the organization and leader a favor.

What would it look like if a whole community were to espouse greater trust and ethics?

In Rochester, New York, there is an organization called [Elevate Rochester](#). The organization has been in existence for 20 years. I am in my fifth year of serving on the Board of Directors. Our vision is to have Rochester be the “Gold Standard” in terms of promoting ethical business cultures.

Each year we have an award ceremony (modeled after the Academy Awards complete with a red carpet). We create greater community emphasis on ethical corporate behaviors by celebrating those groups that are doing it right.

During the year, we encourage local organizations to submit an application for the award. The judging process is quite rigorous. It includes interviews and site visits, along with a written application. An Elevate Rochester committee names recipients of the award each year.

The ETHIE Award

The year culminates with a ceremony in November when a few companies receive the “ETHIE” Award. Each company has a professionally-made video of its operation and receives a trophy. It is a very big deal here in Rochester. Dozens of organizations have received the award and have become part of our Honor Roll.

In addition, we run several programs each year. We help educate the business and government communities on how to focus more energy on ethical behaviors. I have spoken at several events as part of the group. We have a list of people who speak on ethics. Speakers also come from other parts of the country. It is a community effort that benefits all organizations in our region.

Conclusion

It is possible to enhance the level of ethical behavior in an entire community. Of course, perfection will never be achieved. By celebrating the organizations that are doing well with ethics, we enhance the overall performance of our region.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations