

The Forum For Ethics in the Workplace

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[1] Is it ethical for an employee to accept a new job knowing he will leave it as soon as a better one appears? Is it ethical for an employer to hire a new employee knowing the position will be eliminated as soon as the human resources department can find a suitable outsource? These were the types of questions being tossed about in the rear seat of my car on the way home from "ethics breakfast."

[2] This paper will report on the way a small group of lay people can develop a forum for ethics in the workplace which will serve a community of 250,000 people. It can easily be replicated.

[3] It all began about eight years ago when a group of laypersons from the major churches in western Allentown, Pennsylvania, met to discuss the creation of an organization to support Christians in the workplace. We wrote a mission statement and a work plan. We then went to local business owners and managers for feedback. Our intention was not to deal with the high profile situations such as Enron or Arthur Anderson, but rather local persons and organizations.

[4] After about 10 feedback interviews we discovered surprisingly consistent advice. First, a Christian-based "support" organization will raise questions about our purposes. Few employers would endorse such a group. We should become an interfaith group. Second, they all encouraged the creation of an independent organization that supported ethics in the workplace.

[5] We expanded our board to include Muslim and Jewish business persons. We rewrote our mission statement and became incorporated in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as The Interfaith Coalition on Ethics in the Workplace. We filed for and received our 501 (c)(3) tax exemption status. (Our board has always had an attorney member.) The Mission Statement is simply "to provide opportunities for people to come together for study, reflection, conversation and action on ethical issues in the workplace."

[6] We decided that our program would initially be built around Spring and Fall Ethics Breakfasts that would be open to the community. Knowing that our initial breakfast had to be a very good one, we asked a high profile retired priest, who serves on many local business and charitable boards and is an excellent speaker, to be our keynote presenter. He was pleased to do so since he highly supported what we intended to do. The topic of our first breakfast was "Ethics in the Workplace: Challenge and Opportunity." He delivered a terrific speech which earned good headlines and reports in our two local newspapers. We had hoped for 50 participants. We got over 100! It was a great start.

[7] The breakfasts at \$25 per person cover the cost of food and table programs. The expense for designing and printing a four-fold two-color program on heavy stock and mailing to about 700 addresses is covered by our operating budget. Speakers have been willing to contribute their services. Because we want to cover a broad territory we vary the locations. Buffet breakfasts begin at 7:00 AM and are over by 9:00 AM. The programs are structured to offer at least 30 minutes for table discussion.

[8] The topic of our second Ethics Breakfast was "Whistle-Blowing: Virtue or Betrayal?" We had a panel of three plus a moderator. The panel consisted of the CEO of a fairly large local corporation (350 employees), an attorney with whistle-blowing experience and the senior manager, Diversity Management/Ethics of a national corporation. The moderator was the dean of the School of Business at one of our large local universities. The CEO, who was well known for his highly ethical business practices, felt that his company was so structured that any employee with an ethical concern could express it to someone in management without fear of reprisal. The attorney pointed out that in his experience it is always risky to blow the whistle on a person or policy without ultimately paying a price. The senior manager for corporate ethics agreed and outlined an ombudsman process that she said protects whistle blowers. Table discussion on this topic was robust.

[9] Another breakfast was titled, "Employer/Employee Loyalty: An Ethical Issue?" We had two speakers with vastly different employment experiences. One was the president of a local public utility where he had spent all of his forty-some years with the same company. He decried the loss of employee loyalty in recent years. The second speaker was an entrepreneur for 25 years, working for many companies as an employee or consultant and jumping from one to another whenever he spotted an opportunity. As kindly as he could, he pointed out to the CEO the loss of employer loyalty over the past two decades. "How many of my friends have been the victims of outsourcing, downsizing, reduction of health plans and even loss of pensions? Where is the employer loyalty to them?" The table conversation was similar to the questions raised at the start of this article.

[10] In an effort to attract more women to our breakfasts we presented one breakfast with the theme, "The Ethics of Gender in the Workplace: A Woman's Perspective." Our featured speaker was a young woman who is vice chairman of her family-owned publishing company. She presented an excellent lecture, making the case that "A woman is not a little man." The issue is more than sexual harassment or sexual discrimination, she said. It is not seeing or hearing a woman at a company meeting, or not asking her to join the "guys" at lunch or on the way home from work. It is tuning out her report whenever she speaks. Even women tune out other women as not being important. Her many challenges provided much table conversation. But our effort to attract more women was largely unsuccessful. Perhaps up to ten more women than usual attended, but that did not make up for a lower attendance by men. It proved the speaker's point: If the topic was about women, it could not have been very important.

[11] At one of our board meetings we discussed how moral reasoning is developed in people. We agreed that parents had a somewhat limited time to teach values to their children. The teachers on our board told of the limitations in teaching values placed upon them by school boards. Yet we tended to agree that, along the way, human beings naturally tend to develop certain moral

values that are essentially objective, eternal and universal. What is not learned naturally is how emotions and drives tend to affect rationality. This is where teaching ethics, especially applied ethics, is important in our colleges and universities. So we decided to offer a breakfast with the theme, "Teaching Ethics: When Everyone Is Responsible, No One Is ..." Actually the title should have been "Teaching Applied Ethics: When Everyone...etc." We were concerned that many people would misunderstand the significance of using "applied" in the title and thus not be interested.

[12] The first speaker was a university professor who would deal with the classical thinking of philosophers as to behavior ethics. The second speaker was to deal exclusively with teaching applied ethics at colleges and universities. Since I had taught business ethics for six years as an adjunct professor at a local college, I was selected to do the job. The moderator was the president of one of our colleges who had great interest in what our organization was doing.

[13] I began my talk by reporting on a survey I did of five universities and six colleges within a 20 mile radius of Allentown. Of the 11 colleges/universities only two required some type of ethics course. One of the two was taught in the Philosophy Department, the other in the Religion Department. For students majoring in business, only four of the 11 offered business ethics courses in the business department, and only two required it. Applied ethics, which may include business, is offered by four schools, but only one required it.

[14] My conclusion is that in most of the 11 schools I studied it is possible that a business major can graduate without ever having taken a course in business ethics, or general ethics. Only two schools require general ethics.

[15] Our area is typical. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, which accredits business school programs, found that in 2003 only 35% of its member schools required students to take an ethics course. It wasn't until the business scandals of recent years that some of the elite business schools like Harvard started requiring ethics courses. On the other hand the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania has required MBA students to take an ethics course since 1975 and began offering a PhD program in business ethics in 2003.

[16] This brings us to a very important issue. M.B.A. stands for Master of Business Administration. M.B.A. students are steeped in various principles of economics, and the basic goal of business economics is to maximize profit for shareholders. The bottom line is it. M.B.A. students must learn the various scientific approaches to economics that will maximize profits. The quest for academic excellence in economic theory has "high-jacked" any concern for ethics or management. Henry Mitzenberg, a Canadian business professor, writes, "The M.B.A. trains the wrong people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences. What is needed is a greater emphasis on Master of Business Management, where business ethics is a required core emphasis."

[17] There was very good table discussion and many comments/questions from the floor. An interesting outgrowth of our ethics breakfasts has been the development of a subgroup that specializes in sports ethics. One of our board members, a professor of kinesiology at a nearby campus of Penn State, gathered a small cadre of coaches, referees, parents and school directors

with the intent of offering sports ethics breakfasts. The concern is the inadequate attention to ethics on the part of some volunteer coaches, officials and parents involved in club and scholastic sports of all types. With the support and advancement of seed money by our Forum for Ethics in the Workplace, the Sports Ethics group offered its first evening public meeting. It was well attended by coaches and officials, but few parents. The Sports Ethics group is now an official program of the Forum for Ethics in the Workplace. They have their own board of directors but can secure financial contributions under our 501 (c)(3) tax exemption provisions.

[18] Our Forum for Ethics in the Workplace has a speakers' bureau and from time to time we get a request for a speaker. Service clubs such as Rotary or Kiwanis are our usual source of requests. We have twice received a request from a company to send someone to help with the creation of a code of ethics.

[19] Quarterly, the Forum for Ethics in the Workplace produces and distributes a newsletter of four to six pages, mailed to all persons on our breakfast mailing list. The newsletter reports on the most recent ethics breakfast and announces the topic of the next one. We frequently include an ethics "case study" and invite readers' responses. Cost for the production and mailing of the newsletter comes out of our operating budget.

[20] Each copy of the newsletter invites readers to become "partners" in the Forum for Ethics in the Workplace by making an annual contribution. Individuals contribute \$50 per year. Organizations (businesses, churches, human service organizations, etc.) pay on a graduated scale depending on the number of their employees. These receipts, plus grants we receive from businesses and charitable organizations, make up our annual operating budget. We have not been successful in raising enough money from these sources to support the hiring of a paid executive director.

[21] Efforts are underway to partner with a local university and there are some hopeful signs that this can be accomplished.

[22] Based on our experience I am convinced that what we did for ethics in the workplace in our region can be done by any small group of persons committed to the principle.