

Guest Ethics Column: McInnes: Work on building your ethical compass

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Published: Monday, November 9, 2009

Updated: Monday, November 9, 2009

Every person has a standard of ethics used for him or herself and applied to others. These standards are developed in childhood, evolving over the course of their lifetime, from teachings and examples instilled from parents and family members, school teachers and church or religious authorities, along with all the surrounding input of friends, movies and other life experiences.

Your view of right and wrong, doing the right thing and treating people the way you would like to be treated, bubbles in and out of you as you go through life. You are constantly learning and expanding your personal ethical base of understanding. For example, as I sit here, writing this paper, I am learning, assessing, reasoning and adjusting my ethical compass. The process occurs every hour of every day.

Doing the right thing is always on my mind as I move through the people world of the university. Every night I review the decisions and actions made during the day, making certain that the right thing was done in my interactions with others, as well as evaluating those decisions which affect only me.

Important among the many challenges set before me as Dean of the Jerry S. Rawls College of Business is the crucial challenge of making sure our students have been given an opportunity to re-evaluate and understand their own ethical stance, and to state and restate the various courses of action that are available to them in their dealings with others.

How do we teach this evaluation and adjustment process to the students? First, students need to understand it is essential to live by ethical guidelines every hour of every day.

Helping students to understand this critical aspect goes beyond a course — it is something that must permeate their lives, touching each and every decision they make throughout their day. The students are challenged by opportunities to plagiarize papers, cheat on tests and other temptations that arise to test their ethical compass.

I always tell our students that, upon graduation and beginning their first working experience, they will face one of their first ethical tests in the business world — filling out an expense report. The expense account calls for an honest recording of expenses incurred while performing duties for their new employer. The opportunity to fudge some of the numbers, making the reimbursement a little heavier in their favor, is often tempting. Numbers such as hours spent on a particular task can be easily exaggerated.

Miscellaneous items — cab fare, tips — can be inflated. Although these are small amounts of money, this can represent one of the first tests of ethical behavior and you should always ask yourself, “Did I do the expense accounting fairly and correctly?”

As one continues to move through his or her business career, they will be tested by every decision made, and they should always ask themselves the question — was I fair and honest? Do I feel good in that the transaction was a win/win situation for all involved?

You’re not always going to feel good about every decision or situation, but you should get as close as possible.

Finally, the question is — how do I set the ethical compass in my being? Earlier I mentioned at the beginning of a young life, parents, family and others input rules of behavior which you can live by, and as you move through life, new experiences will sharpen your ethical edge. By understanding the happenings in the world around you, you will also be able to sharpen and stimulate your own ethical guideposts.

Reading the newspaper, watching the news, and seeing other people’s actions and reactions to situations faced every day will cause you to adjust your ethical compass, allowing the assimilation of new thoughts obtained from these activities. With proper adjustments and input incorporated into your ethical thought processes, you will be able to move through your life making ethical decisions which are fair, allowing yourself to answer in the affirmative to the question, “Did I do the right thing?”

Comment

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Tue Nov 10 2009 15:14

Well said! Some decisions are very hard to make, but when weighed against "doing the right thing", it can certainly make those decisions a bit easier.