

Moral Amnesia

An Essay

We are in an ethical crisis. The affliction in many companies and people is *moral amnesia*. Whether you are in a leadership role or not, it no longer matters when we look at the state of our ethical behavior.

Moral: Of, or relating to, principles of right and wrong in behavior. Ethical. Behaving with integrity. Defining *immoral* and *unethical* is like defining pornography: "You know it when you see it."

But what does it mean to be ethical and moral? It sounds like a good thing, and we know to steer clear of the unethical person, but how do we know if someone is ethical or not? Should we even care?

When I first began speaking on ethics and integrity, I was confused about their differences. I thought they were the same. From a business perspective, *ethics* are the statements that hang on the wall. *Integrity* is the way in which the ethics are consistently applied.

On a personal level, *ethics* are your life values, and *integrity* is the way you role model and apply your values to your relationships, parenting, caring and giving.

In life, *ethics* are our values and when applied consistently to life, both at work and at home, make one a moral human being. Ethics plus integrity equal morality.

Lou Pai, CEO of Enron and greedy executive, took \$994 million via stock sales from January 1999 through May 2002. He had the "Ethics of Enron" hanging in his office. We can probably agree *integrity* was not in his vocabulary. The high bid items on e-bay, amid hundreds of stress balls and T-shirts, were unopened codes of ethics, paperweights bearing the company's "Visions and Values" statements and corporate magazines outlining Enron's 401(k) benefits.

Here are the moral and ethical questions, and please think about this:

- *Would you be able to blow the whistle, as Sherron Watkins did at Enron, to uncover a wrongdoing in your workplace?* I am not talking about petty differences and workplace conflicts.
- *Are the shareholders being blindsided because of improper reporting of financials?*
- *Are customers being scammed because of a shabbily produced product?*
- *Are health challenged people being duped by poor diagnoses or false cures?*

Would you be willing to risk your monthly income, your retirement, your reputation and more on doing the right thing? Would you be able to be Erin Brockovich? The good news for her is that, after years of courtroom battles and slanderous media, she is making big bucks on the speaking circuit. But first she had to put her integrity on the line. Are you willing to take that risk?

The payoff for these people is that they snapped out of what many suffer from: moral amnesia. They can look themselves in the mirror and like what they see. Not just superficially, but to the core.

What moral amnesia does is make it OK for us not to notice. So start noticing. I quit a high level management job at a Fortune 100 company because of the unethical ways of my manager. Here is what I spotted, and this can be a checklist for you.

- Cheating on expense reports.
- Promising clients services and products they knew they couldn't supply.
- Including personal expenditures as business.
- Creating policy for others but not abiding by the same policy for themselves.
- Not walking their talk.
- Expecting others to do their dirty work.
- Padding financial budgets to cover poor planning.

Can you reasonably deal with someone who tells you something that could just as easily be a lie as the truth? Can you deal with a person whom you cannot trust? Can

you reasonably deal with someone who would steal from you, even kill you? I hope the answers are obvious.

There are three courses of action: 1) Accept the situation. 2) Adapt your behavior. 3) Act on it, and do not take it personally.

'To escape criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing,' said Elbert Hubbard.

Results: People watch to see how you perform. Plus, the view you have of yourself in the mirror will look fabulous!

Solution: Have a meeting with your group (work and home), brainstorm together and write down what you, as a team, deem to be ethical behavior. Post these parameters in visible places. Continue to have a moral review to catch people acting in an ethical manner and with integrity. As Ken Blanchard, author of *Gung Ho*, says, "Behavior that is recognized will be repeated." This renewed awareness is the true cure for moral amnesia.



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