

All About Integrity

A Conundrum of Organizational Culture



Lisa Price

EDITOR'S NOTE: Lisa Price was the winner of the 2016 Ogletree Deakins Human Resources Professional of the Year award. Nominations are open for the 2017 award with a March 3 deadline (www.IndianaHRConf.com/award).

When offered the opportunity to write this column, I considered many worthy topics from around my organization – community involvement, training and development, and new tools that simplify the employee experience. But instead of highlighting a problem we solved or a program we implemented, I opted to cover a more abstract concept that is central to any organization's success: integrity.

As human resources professionals, we often find ourselves in a conundrum of culture. On one hand, we're entrusted to promote a positive work environment that engages employees, fosters creativity, and attracts and retains the best talent. At the same time, we're charged with enforcing the policies necessary to maintain compliance, mitigate legal risk and safeguard corporate reputation. Finding the perfect balance of these two interrelated responsibilities can be challenging, particularly in areas without hard and fast rules.

Integrity as a pillar of culture presents a unique challenge because integrity itself can be difficult to clearly define. Conceptually, the vast majority of employees – and human beings – have a pretty solid grasp on how to think and act with integrity. Make good decisions. Do the right thing. Play fair. But integrity doesn't lend itself to a succinct set of rules, and it would be both daunting and futile to attempt compiling a comprehensive list of scenarios that do or do not meet the definition.

Integrity can also be challenging to measure. When integrity is present or working effectively in your organization, nothing happens. And because of that, you never really know you have a problem with integrity until, well, you have a problem. Most organizations like my own implement a system of operational checks and balances and monitoring capabilities that safeguard against dishonesty or unfair business practices. But none of these tactical approaches truly get to the heart of advancing cultural integrity.

Balancing act

And so, with little more to go on than "I know-it-when-I-see-it," how can any organization effectively enforce or promote integrity? How can you ensure integrity is more than simply a word on the wall, but less than a rigid edict ultimately doomed to fail? I certainly don't have all of the answers nor a perfect blueprint for success, but there are a few central concepts that have helped keep integrity front and center at my company.

First, integrity needs to start at the top. The primary role of any CEO or executive is to set the tone – and the example – for the rest of the organization.

Integrity must be a standard part of his or her repertoire and needs to be a deliberate conversation in the board room all the way through manager and employee one-on-ones. Leading by example is the absolute floor for integrity, because management's words, deeds and actions will be imitated and repeated throughout every corner of your organization.

Setting the stage

But at its core, integrity is an organic and personal value – so it must also come from the bottom up. Talking at – versus with – employees and telling them to act a certain way is rarely convincing or effective. Set clear expectations on integrity and the accountability that goes with it. Acknowledge being unable to set rules for every scenario, but give easy, practical ways to think about it. "Would you want your friends and neighbors to see this on the news tomorrow?" or "Would you be proud to talk to your children about your actions?" are great everyday guides for employee decision-making.

And finally, find those areas in your organization where integrity is healthy, living and breathing. Pick out those instances of doing the right thing and celebrate them wildly. Too often we only communicate about integrity when things are going wrong or in response to a negative event. But it is even more important to highlight the positives – individuals who have done the right thing and how their actions helped win or keep a customer, deliver better results or make a positive change. Let those be the shining examples for your organization and let their stories serve as both the foundation and guideposts for your future.

Seeking that perfect balance between promoting and policing integrity and all of our company values is one of the most challenging and motivating parts of my role. When it's missing, I am driven to find it. And when it happens, the results are incredibly gratifying.

As you consider nominations for the 2017 Ogletree Deakins Human Resources Professional of the Year Award presented by the Indiana Chamber, I encourage you to think about leaders who have found innovative ways to effectively balance these roles and advance positive change in their own companies, industries and communities.

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