

We Can Stop and Think!

Hiring Future Executives Who Can Make Successful Ethical Decisions in the 21st Century

There are tens of thousands of young people, college graduates many of them, who enter the job market every year. In my work, I am frequently told that the young workers of the new millennium have a different or altered sense of ethics. I am not always certain what people mean when they say a “different sense of ethics” but there is no doubt the insinuation is that today’s young workers are not as ethical or honest as older workers. I am not certain this is true, but many corporate and educational leaders seem to believe it is.

The young graduates and professionals of the new millennium have grown up amidst innumerable professional and political scandals, where high profile leaders are no longer role models. Unethical and illegal behavior inundates their world. And, their world more than any other generation’s is driven by a culture of media and information technology. It often bothers me that the next generation of professional leaders has so much exposure to unethical behavior and wrongdoing.

Is there a reason why our personal and professional lives are becoming inundated with reports of unethical behavior? I believe many factors have impacted how businesses and people in general, make decisions today. The seemingly constant flow of negative news is but one factor. There is also a demand for ever more information and access to information. Correspondingly, we feel obligated to know more and be constantly in contact. Technology has made us accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, anywhere in the world, at all times. The expectation is that humans should function as technology functions. Today, communications are instantaneous and immediate creating the expectation that responses and decisions should be simultaneous. As a consequence, our time for thoughtful deliberation in decision making has suffered.

I have discussed this topic frequently with my colleagues and many of them have noticed this as well. Technology in many respects was intended to make us more accessible, but does it really? It is my view that all too often we hide behind technology. It is easier to send an email or leave a scalding or belligerent voice mail than it is to deliver that same message face to face. This technological wall creates a false sense of separation which lends itself to rapid emotional response sent without thoughtful consideration. We now have a generation of young people who have grown up attached to all this technology. Cell phones, internet and text messages have been a way of life. As such, these influences have a disproportionate effect on this generation.

I know some of you may be asking at this point, what does this have to do with hiring future executives who can make successful ethical decisions? For me, the answer is really quite simple. When we are willing to be distracted in our conversations and communications, we lose personal connectedness. Think about what happens when we talk on a cell phone in an elevator so that others can hear, allow our phone to ring in class, or choose to scroll through a Blackberry in an airport instead of engaging in a conversation with someone we don’t yet know. All of these things make us more separate, and definitely less connected with those around us. I would strongly argue that

the more separate we become from others and our community, the more willing we are to put our own interests above others.

Further, our information age has also substantially changed the economic condition in which we live. There is a constant demand for greater productivity in every economic sector. Globalization and competition have fueled the need for economic flexibility in all commerce. Unfortunately, economic flexibility has essentially created financial insecurity for many. This feeling of financial insecurity has made daily living more difficult, further exacerbating our ability to make thoughtful ethical decisions.

The consequences of our present reality are apparent. Job insecurity may cause one person to falsify an employment application or another to usurp a colleague's idea. For example, an applicant may embellish his education a bit to look more desirable to an employer. In fact, a study conducted by resumedoctor.com in June 2006 informed that nearly 43% of more than 1,100 resumes that were checked for accuracy contained at least one "significant inaccuracy." People are nervous the first time; but if they don't get caught, they do it again. The more they do it, the easier it becomes. Eventually, it becomes routine. Over time, applicants no longer think about it; their little white lie has become accepted. The "little" misrepresentation has become an accepted, yet false, part of their thought processes, affecting their thinking and the truth they have come to know. Their fundamental sense of ethics has been altered, though only slightly.

This willingness to misrepresent a fact on a resume is propelled most often by financial need. Today, college graduates move into the job market with more debt than ever. The average student loan debt for college graduates has grown from \$11,400 in 1997 to \$18,900 in 2002, according to the most recent study conducted by NellieMae, a student loan provider.¹ This education debt is exacerbated by the rising personal debt. Simply put, graduates need jobs more than ever and may misrepresent to get these jobs.

I sincerely believe that inside most people there is a moral compass which guides them. They know right versus wrong and try to do the right thing at work and in their daily lives. When people stray from their integrity and sense of ethics, it is likely due to the fear of failure and economic insecurity. This fear is exacerbated by ever-changing and ever demanding technology which has created not just an economic condition, but a social condition of rapid decision making. The affect of this situation is magnified in the lives of young job seekers. Some of them have never held full-time jobs, many of them have never had to support themselves financially and other have never been outside of the academic environment. The pressure on their moral compasses is intense.

I do believe there is a solution or at least a training approach that can help. I have found that people who consistently prioritize the best interests of others over their own are the happiest and quite often most successful people. These successful individuals are always acting in someone else's best interest. Stated another way, these people are ultimately getting what they want WITHOUT getting in trouble. All these people seem to have one thing in common, they conduct their daily lives like a fiduciary. A fiduciary is defined by [Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2006](#) as a noun referring to a person "*to whom property or power is entrusted for the benefit of another.*" A fundamental principle for acting as a fiduciary is taking the time and effort to fully weigh a decision. A fiduciary is deliberative and never hesitates to rely upon the expertise of others for assistance.

¹ 2002 National Student Loan Survey, www.nelliemae.com/library/research_10.html

Teaching our young leaders to process an ethical dilemma as a fiduciary, whether in the academic environment or through corporate training programs, has become an imperative. I can tell you as a professor at a major university, there are few programs which focus on real-life ethical dilemmas. There are some required ethics courses, but in the same way people distance themselves from each other, the students often distance themselves from the theoretical nature of these courses. Frequently, students rationalize that they will never face an ethical dilemma that they cannot solve on their own. I can also say from experience that when posed with a true ethical dilemma, many students tended to leap to a conclusion rather than the consequences on all concerned.

The process of interviewing and hiring junior executives as well as staff employees is daunting. It is difficult to gain real insight into their character and their potential behavior in the future. Artfully written resumes and formal interviews can only reveal so much. Character witnesses and references are helpful but, until these young people are faced with a true ethical dilemma, you cannot predict their reaction with any certainty. What doesn't come through in this hiring process is what they would do if they began to feel the financial and competitive pressure? Would they act ethically and according to the laws of the jurisdiction? Or would they act in their own best interest and rationalize it? Cover it? Hide it? While you cannot predict it, you can prevent it. Thousands of new employees are trained daily in the various aspects of their functional responsibilities which is why ethical behavior should be viewed as a functional responsibility. Most large corporations and many smaller companies have ethics policies that they require their employees to review and sign upon accepting positions. But often, that's the end of the ethics training. Training is needed to create a deeper understanding of the importance of ethical behavior in the organization. Employees should be told what is unethical and the consequences of such actions. Real life ethical dilemmas for a particular job need to be specifically addressed in training. How is the dilemma to be handled and to whom do they report the problem? Ethics training is most effective when it is specific and concrete.

A recent survey conducted by *Care2*, an online community website, found that 40 percent of employees polled said they would work longer and harder for a socially responsible organization and 35 percent of employees stated they have terminated employment in the past because they felt the company they worked for was not ethical or socially responsible. Setting the tone for proper behavior early in an employee relationship will not only prevent ethical missteps that can cause corporate catastrophes, but it will also deepen the employees' loyalty to the company and their respect for its management. -- Michael Tate Barkley, J.D.

As both a practicing attorney for over 16 years and an Assistant Clinical Professor for the University of Houston School of Communications, Michael Tate Barkley has become a highly-regarded expert in the development of ethical corporate cultures and effective communications. Barkley's first book, *Successful Ethical Decision Making: Get What You Want Without Getting In Trouble*, written with Dr. John Henry Glover, will be published in November 2007. For more information about Michael Tate Barkley and his company Critical Communications, LLC visit his website at www.criticalcommunications.org.