

To Tackle Gray Areas, Train Employees to Do the Right Thing

To avoid workplace scandal and foster a culture of trust and respect, companies must move away from “check the box” training and toward corporate learning that encourages ethical behavior.

by [Jennifer Farthing](#) September 5, 2018



Too often, we hear about companies caught up in scandal — predatory lending, falsified documentation, racial discrimination, sexual harassment, gender inequality and unfair competition, to name a few. In the aftermath, we hear about how training failed or about how it was a case of “a single bad actor.” Yet, these stories are told virtually every day. That’s a lot of bad

training and a lot of bad actors.

In light of the #MeToo movement, there is much hand-wringing over how to tackle inappropriate behavior through training — and much delay. [Recent statistics](#) show that fewer than 24 percent of respondents say workplaces have provided any additional training since the movement began.

So what can be done to tackle corporate blind spots or poor decision-making when faced with moral gray areas? First, treat training like it's your job. Employees pick up on leaders' lack of engagement or buy-in of training programs. If it seems unimportant or irrelevant to a leader, then it will be treated that way by employees. To break the cycle of “check the box” training, take it seriously, make it good and ensure that it sticks.

Training needs to be “sticky,” but not in that Band-Aid sort of way where the training box is checked and the organization hopes for no new incidents. How can you infuse your teams with moral muscle given that ethics and compliance training is no more than a few hours a year for most employees?

Move Away From “Check the Box” Training

Here are a few ways companies can move away from “check the box” training and toward corporate learning that encourages ethical behavior.

- **Conduct bystander training:** Co-workers can no longer walk away from bad behavior and file the incident under “none of my business.” In the age of social media, reputation and credibility are everything. As an employee, it is everyone's responsibility to speak up, whether observing an improper remark, an ethically questionable alliance or an illegal bribe. Reinforce this message alongside your topical trainings.
- **Walk the talk:** If you train your workforce to speak up, follow through. Take allegations, complaints and reports of misconduct seriously and without premature judgment. Do the work. If you don't, employees will stop speaking up, morale will decrease and retention will become

problematic.

- **Build trust and demonstrate respect:** Workplace culture matters. When leaders provide ways for employees to be autonomous, for instance, by showing them they believe in their capabilities, they respond in kind. Likewise, trustworthy employees deserve respect. Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for inappropriate behavior, from the verbal to the physical and the implicit to the explicit. By demonstrating a lack of tolerance for these behaviors, you provide a moral model for others.
- **Share values:** When employees feel that others — supervisors, peers, direct reports and leaders — share the same values, they take responsibility collectively. Provide opportunities for this at work, such as using authentic success stories in your training to complement your program. Too much focus on regulations and rules can amount to a race to the bottom when it comes to moral behavior and acting with integrity.
- **Teach employees how to make ethical decisions:** It's challenging to weigh pros and cons from a cost or revenue perspective and take that discipline into the moral space. Give your employees a framework for moral evaluation. Start with a simple question, "Is it the right thing to do?"
- **Be mindful of their humanity:** Remind your colleagues they have the power to grow and learn. As individuals, we can tackle tough topics through discourse. As adults, we can remember and relearn. Prompt them to get back in touch with that life lesson learned before social influences may have clouded their judgment. Instead of asking "What's in it for me?", inspire them to stand up for what's right. Then support them.

A final thought: Is it really that employees are caught up not knowing what to do or say when faced with a morally gray scenario, or is it that they do know the right thing to do and are avoiding it because it's hard, it's unpopular or it's career-limiting to speak up?

If the right thing to do is clear and employees are not doing it, perhaps it's

time to take a hard look at your workplace culture. Do you offer current, relevant and appropriate training? Do you walk the talk? Do you foster a culture of trust and respect? Do you tackle the tough topics for learning, such as ethical decision-making? If you are doing all these things right, your workforce will do the right thing.

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