

Companies should train employees in ethics

It's sometimes hard to do the right thing when others lie and cheat

LIZA VAN WYK

IF YOU don't have ethics, you don't have capitalism, wrote Linnea McCord, associate professor of business law at Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business and Management.

"What Americans seem to have forgotten is that our way of life – our political system, our economy, and indeed our freedom – depends entirely on trust, and trust depends on ethical conduct," she says.

As the world consumes the fallout from Lance Armstrong's confession that he used performance-enhancing drugs to conquer the cycling world, we are reminded that honesty, fairness, and integrity seem like wallpaper in the workplace where headlines shout about companies and individuals lying, stealing and cheating to get ahead.

The parade of the morally tainted such as Armstrong has



TAINTED: The Lance Armstrong confession has led to a re-examination of workplace ethics, says Liza van Wyk.

caused professional ethicists such as Professor McCord to ask not who has been cheating, but rather who has not. The truth is that millions of rand are lost every day because of unethical behaviour, a reminder that ethics is no longer theory, but a direct route to success.

Workers, professionals and labourers say it is often hard to be

an honest person. They say sometimes one feels like a jerk in a world where other people are cheating their way to the top.

Every day, employees report that they sometimes feel pressured to engage in misconduct to achieve business objectives.

That is why companies encourage workers to blow the whistle on

unethical conduct through fraud lines and whistle-blower projects. After all, one employee's decision when faced with an ethical dilemma could make or break an organisation.

Laws and ethics have related, yet different, meanings. Both refer to society's sense of what comprises acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Laws are the rules in society that protect us from the most serious affronts to morality, such as murder. Ethics also covers less offensive behaviours, such as lying, for which laws are not written. This means a chief executive or business leader can act within the law, yet be considered unethical.

Of course, people often have an ambiguous relationship with the truth. William Shakespeare picked up plots for his plays wherever he could, while in his essay on liars, the French philosopher Montaigne warned his readers that adding lie upon lie was like trying to forever patch a leaky roof.

Ethics can be learnt and can be used to keep an employee from causing the next big corporate scandal. After all, business can't survive

if it can't be trusted to do the right thing. So ethics, like any other academic discipline, is fundamental to any business's survival.

Companies should offer annual workshops and training in ethics for employees to immerse themselves in ethics training.

The goal should be to share experiences and develop new techniques to enable employees to raise their own ethical awareness and ability to make rational, ethical choices in the business world.

Workers, employees and employers should think much harder about business ethics on a daily basis.

There should never be any confusion over what every employee and employer's responsibilities are, and over where the limits of those responsibilities lie.

Managers of companies must confront these questions in running their businesses, just as individuals must in leading their everyday lives.

● Liza van Wyk is chief executive of AstroTech Training, which offers leadership development training. Visit www.astrotech.co.za or call 0861 AstroTech.

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