

## Overcoming the “fear of ethics”

by Joanne B. Ciulla, Ph. D.

Sometimes when I tell a skeptical stranger that I teach business ethics, the response is an awkward pause followed by this bad joke: “I have an ethical dilemma. I just short-changed an old lady \$50” [the speaker pauses for dramatic effect], “and I can’t decide whether I should split it with my partner.” If the skeptic does not possess this very small nugget of wit, he or she will quip, “Yes, but isn’t business ethics an oxymoron?” After years of talking to people about ethics in corporate and MBA courses, I’ve come to the conclusion that some business people suffer from ethics phobia. This affliction consists of three fears.

The first fear is of the subject itself. Ethics is a vague and frustrating topic. Some believe that it is *very personal* — “everyone has their own view of right and wrong so it’s impossible to get a consensus.” Others see ethics as black and white and they don’t want their opinions challenged. While a third group thinks that talking about ethics at the office is useless, “Some people are good and some are rotten, talking about ethics won’t change that fact.”

The second fear is that ethics is bad for business. Ethical concerns, such as the obligations that a company has to customers, employees and suppliers get in the way of hard-driving competitive strategies. I frequently hear, “If we don’t do it, our competitors will and they’ll get the client or make the sale.” They argue “we can’t afford ethics in our business,” or “leave it to the market to reward and punish companies.”

The third and perhaps most predominant fear is that moral convictions are bad for your career. I was once told, “When I see something going on at work that I think is wrong, I keep my mouth shut. All of this ethical talk is great, but not everyone is cut out to play the hero.” These folks assume that only the people at the top can act on their values, while other employees must accept the status quo. Two unrealistic fears that are central to ethics phobia come together on this point. The first is that the business world is not friendly to people with moral integrity, and second is that employers don’t want employees to act on their moral convictions.

Like all phobias, you can cure ethics phobia by engaging people in the dreaded activity. In this case, treat it by openly discussing ethical concerns in the workplace. Ironically, I think that some people’s cynicism about business ethics masks an uncomfortable respect for moral principles. Ethics phobia might be related to the tyranny of the human conscience — those powerful voices that keep us from doing what we want. Some people would like the workplace to be a refuge from the constant nagging of their conscience. Fortunately, most people discover that it isn’t — and they probably tell better jokes.