

WORKPLACE ETHICS IN THE POST-ENRON WORLD

Two recently-released surveys of workplace ethics provide a mixed bag of employees' views about the topic. Watson Wyatt released a survey of 1200 US employees on January 12 that found that almost 60 percent of workers believe that upper-level managers in their organization are lacking in honesty and integrity. Better news from this survey, however, is that nearly 75% of respondents believe that their immediate boss is trustworthy. When asked what they perceived to be the reasons for unethical behavior, almost 60% of respondents indicated their belief that hypocrisy and favoritism were the causes, with only 8% blaming dishonest financial dealings.

These results differ from those published in the 2003 National Business Ethics Survey, which was conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management and the Ethics Resource Center. This survey found marked improvement in employees' perceptions of workplace ethics between its 2000 and 2003 surveys. Observed misconduct dropped from 31% in 2000 to 22% in 2003, while pressure to compromise one's own ethics standards fell from 13% to 10% during this time period. This survey found that the most frequently observed ethical breaches include: abusive or intimidating behavior; misreporting of hours worked; lying; and withholding needed information. Compared with other employees, younger managers (under age 30) with less than 3 years in their organizations are twice as likely to feel pressure to compromise ethics standards. In addition, this survey found that younger employees with low tenure are also among the least likely to report misconduct. One of the most disconcerting findings of this survey is that approximately one third of respondents indicated that their coworkers condone questionable ethics practices by showing respect for those who achieve success using them.

One of the challenges surrounding ethics issues in the workplace is simply forging a consistent, commonly-held definition of what constitutes unethical behavior. While most of us would agree that acts such as embezzlement of company funds or acceptance of bribes or kickbacks fall in the category of unethical behavior, what about issues such as using the office copier to make a few photocopies for personal use? Taking a pen or notepad from the office to use at home? The survey results indicate that ethics program can definitely have an impact on both defining and improving ethics within the workplace. Such a program includes written standards of conduct – to provide that sometimes elusive definition of what is unethical. Developing channels through which observed misconduct can be reported anonymously is also helpful in ridding the

workplace of ethical breaches. Additionally, providing ethics training for employees can help everyone in the workplace get a better understanding of the importance of ethical behavior and, equally importantly, an understanding of how to report any misconduct they may observe.