

Do the Right Thing: What's Your Credo?

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Beliefs are powerful. Hitler and his extermination of the Jews, Stalin and his Reign of Terror, Pol Pot's ruthless killing of millions of Cambodians, and most recently, Sadaam Hussein's ethnic cleansing of the Khurdish people all occurred because of a belief held by an individual. It is relatively easy for you and I to sit back in the comfort of our homes and condemn these people and their actions. But it is interesting to consider that while these leaders were in power, they believed that what they were doing was the moral and ethical thing to do and they exerted great influence over thousands, if not millions, of people who followed them. Some still do.

If people like Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot and Sadaam Hussein all felt justified in their ruthless actions based on their beliefs, as a leader, how are you ensuring that what you believe is truly honorable?

What is The "Right Thing?"

When asked if lying was acceptable, a group of high school students, without exception, all initially said that lying was wrong. Most of you will probably agree that lying is not doing the right thing and, judging by their websites, all businesses would agree. In a recent survey of business websites, including those of Fortune 500 companies, we commonly found core values that state that companies believe in honesty and integrity. They give the distinct impression that they always look out for your best interest and that you can count on them to be absolutely, 100% honest. In our survey we did not find a single website that suggested that the company told the truth only *part* of the time.

Let's digress for a moment and take a journey back in time to Germany in 1941. World War II is in full swing and Hitler is exterminating the Jews. For many years you lived next door to a Jewish family and, not being able to bear the thought of their being executed, you decide to hide them in your house. One night, the Gestapo pound on your door and ask the whereabouts of the family. What would you do? Is lying appropriate in this case?

Philosophically speaking, there are different ways of looking at lying, primarily:

- 1) Lying is never right.
- 2) Lying is sometimes wrong.
- 3) Lying is neither right nor wrong.

In business, the trend is to oversimplify matters when it comes to integrity; we naively approach lying from the perspective of "lying is *never* right." Yet we are faced with dilemmas involving lying almost daily. Without thinking about it, we casually tell "white lies" all the time. We make excuses for co-workers or bosses who don't want to pick up the phone. We exaggerate claims in our marketing material and during our sales pitches. We try to "bluff" our way through the gatekeepers to talk with the decision-makers. These are all acceptable, or at least expected behavior in the world of business.

There may, in fact, be other times when many of us intentionally lie, even though we really know that what we are saying is wrong. Let's suppose that you are working for a company or a department that is on its last legs, financially. You need new business to

stay afloat and have one last chance in a project on which you are bidding. The qualifications put out by the customer require you to have eight years of experience in a certain area. But your company or division only has seven.

What would you do? Would you apply anyway by stretching the truth, or would you not apply and fold your company, letting all your employees go in the process. If you discuss this amongst your peers, most (but not all!) would say that lying is probably justified in this case; you stay in business, provide a service to your customer, and life goes on.

Yet, high school students, most of you, and businesses proclaim publicly that lying is wrong. To get around this dilemma, we justify our actions with the "white lie" label. This poses a significant problem for all of us. How do you know that what you are doing is just a white lie instead of a major breach of integrity? What is the right thing to do?

Why Ethics Programs Don't Work

Ethics programs don't work because they only advocate the politically correct viewpoint that lying is not the right thing to do: "We don't lie, cheat, or steal." Our children are being taught that lying is always unacceptable. In business, we are taught the same thing in our ethics programs -- and never publicly state or even imply that we might lie at times, even if they are just "white lies." We simplify matters to such an extent that we tell people that we expect them to uphold this standard, but in reality, we lie all the time. By glossing over the truth -- that we are faced with ethical dilemmas on a daily basis that have no easy answer -- we cannot teach our children, our employees, or ourselves as leaders how to make morally sound decisions to do the right thing.

Credo: "This I Believe"

If you cannot be honest 100% of the time or have moments when you might consider cheating, you can be sure that everyone else in your company feels the same way. Statistics on workplace ethics have shown that roughly 50% of the workforce would consider lying, cheating, or stealing if they thought they could get away with it.

As a leader, it is imperative that you mentor the people around you in determining the right thing to do. But before you can teach them, you must have an understanding of what *you* believe to be the foundation upon which you base *your* decisions. Do you believe lying is always wrong, or sometimes justified?

How do you determine appropriate behavior? What is your yardstick to measure your actions against? If you were to write a one-page statement that started off with the statement, "This I believe" what would your statement say?

Imagine you had to leave work for an extended period of time but were still going to be held accountable for all that happens in your absence. What would you tell your staff? I believe that you would not benefit from using statements like, "Value people above all else," "Get the job done," or "The customer is always right" -- these are pretty bold statements that are too simple to apply to the reality of business.

Another common method used in writing a credo, which I also find too simplistic, recommends asking yourself three questions: 1) Is it legal?; 2) What would I do if it

made the news?; and 3) How would I feel if my family found out about it?. While these are helpful, they are too generic and still leave a lot of wiggle room when it comes to doing the right thing.

An example of a good value statement is, "I value listening to all parties involved in any discussion." This is something that someone can do in all cases. In regards to honesty, you might suggest putting in place a process where at every meeting someone is assigned on a rotating basis to be the group conscience. If doubt exists about the integrity of a decision, this individual would be responsible for pointing it out to the group for discussion before a final decision is made.

Take the time to define what you believe by developing a credo statement. Write a one-page memo that describes what you believe to be the heart and soul of your business philosophy. Be careful and thoughtful if you use cliché's such as "integrity" or "honesty." These are superficial words that mean nothing in the actual trenches where work gets done. What does honesty or integrity look like?

It is important that you, as a leader, paint a picture for your staff and employees that can be used as a barometer against which they can measure their actions. When someone on your team is faced with an ethical dilemma, provide them something they can use to help get through it in a way that mirrors your expectations as their leader.