

A black silhouette of a man in a suit and hat stands on a path of brown arrows pointing in various directions. The background is split into a blue top half with question marks and a green bottom half. The man's shadow is cast on the green background.

In the wake of several financial debacles, all employees now are expected to make sound ethical decisions. Not having an ethics program—and effective training on it—in place can spell organizational disaster.

BY CYNTHIA KINCAID

# The RIGHT STUFF



iven the current economic fallout created by possible ethics violations by many financial firms and mortgage companies, organizations big and small are beginning to cast a critical eye toward developing or enhancing their own in-house ethics training programs. In fact, now that all employees are expected to make sound ethical decisions, not having an ethics program in place—and effective training on it—can spell organizational disaster. The stakes have never been higher.

“Companies think to train employees on many things, but they rarely think to train them on ethics, and that’s a big mistake,” says Ann Subervi, president and CEO of Utopia Communications. “We live in a multicultural society now. You can’t teach morality because people come to the workplace with different ethical perspectives.”

So how do you go about developing a program that can educate employees on the importance of ethics?

**SHOW LEADERSHIP.** To begin, ethics must be driven top down by senior management and communicated as something that is not only valued, but expected, throughout the organization. “At the end of the day, you want to let people know that not only are

you open to talking about ethics, but that you take it seriously, and it’s important to your organization,” says Gabriel Romero, director of marketing for The Network, Inc., a technology company that provides ethics communications services.

**DETERMINE COMPANY VALUES.** “You have to figure out what you are going to stand for as a company, and then understand how you are going to become compliant with the law through living those values,” says Jeremy Wilson, manager, ethics office for Cisco Systems, Inc. Conducting your own values evaluation will allow you to customize a program that uniquely fits your own corporate culture, while addressing specific ethical issues.

One-size-fits-all training programs can help a company create compliance do’s and don’ts, “but that doesn’t mean employees will know how to apply them to their day-to-day job,” says Subervi. “You’re better off designing your own program.”

That’s exactly what Cisco did when, in conjunction with The Network, it created a unique ethics training program that parodied the *American Idol* television show. “We wanted what was right for our employees, based upon our own risk analysis,” says Wilson. The Network worked with the company to deliver just that. “Cisco came to us for a highly customized program that incorporated the everyday scenarios its employees faced,” Romero says.

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The resulting Web-based program showcased cartoon contestants singing about various ethical workplace conundrums found in Cisco's Code of Business Conduct. "We pose questions to employees as to which judge's answer they agree with," says Wilson. "Employees can provide feedback, see how the rest of the company voted, and see the official Cisco answer as to which judge is correct in his or her assessment of the situation."

Four different modules were rolled out over four weeks. "We wanted to make it quick and enjoyable to get across some serious messages," says Ralston McCracken, vice president for The Network. "Expectation built week to week. People could not wait to see it."

**SET SPECIFIC GOALS AND AGENDAS.** This will prevent losing valuable time and money in unproductive pursuits. "Work within your organization to determine what needs to be accomplished," Romero advises. Understand what your risks are and then put together a program to combat those risks, adds Wilson.

**INVITE COLLABORATION.** When Cisco created its program, it invited input from more than 120 people from departments across the organization, including legal, human resources, IT security, and records management. "When we rolled it out, 20 different departments helped us," says Wilson.

**CRAFT MESSAGING.** "You need to engage employees in a soothing way about ethics and compliance, instead of turning

them off with the law," says Romero. "Build their confidence and their interest, so they retain the content of the messages ahead of all the other messages with which they are bombarded throughout the day."

**USE MULTIPLE TRAINING CHANNELS.** In addition to Web-based training, Wilson also recommends sticking with the basics of PowerPoint and flip charts as part of an overall training program. "We also conduct focus groups and spend half a day with managers to talk about the particular concerns they have with the organization." Cisco takes that feedback and rolls it out globally.

**DEVELOP A ROLLOUT PLAN.** That, says Subervi, means asking, "Will training be the same for everybody in the organization? How often is it needed? Who's going to design and implement it?"

**ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY.** "Once you tell people how you expect them to come to a decision, and the types of decisions you want them to make, you need to put enforcement into place," Subervi says. Most smart organizations also need to create ways for employees to safely report ethical violations and ask questions, which may involve creating an in-house ethics panel and hiring an ethics officer.

**SERIOUSLY CONSIDER DOING THIS.** "You cannot teach people morality," Subervi says, "but you can teach them how to deal with the ethical problems they encounter in the hopes they will make a good decision." Right on. **T**

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