

ETHICS IN BUSINESS AND LIFE: IS THERE A DISTINCTION?

By W. Theodore Etzel, III

Since the topic of ethics is subjective and based primarily on relative terms and perspectives, the discussion in the abstract sense is a difficult one. Whole philosophy class semesters can be devoted to this single topic alone. In fact, the philosophy class I took in college spent quite a long time on the debating of different points of view of ethics and the basis on which different people and societies based their brand of ethics. Not only that, but the only place for ethics discussions was in the liberal arts arm of the school. No business ethics were taught at that time. My, how times have changed. Every business school worth anything today requires classes on business ethics; in essence, how to behave in business.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the definition of Ethic appears as follows:

1. The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation;
2. A set of moral principles : a theory or system of moral values; the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group; a guiding philosophy; a consciousness of moral importance.
3. A set of moral issues or aspects (as rightness).

Generally then, it is the focus on what is right and what is wrong and what guiding principles should be used to determine and direct your actions. The French literary figure and pseudo-philosopher, Albert Camus, defines ethics this way: "A man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon this world." The need for behavioral guidance in business and life is, therefore, imperative.

So let me share with you the core values we use at Conditioned Air on which we build our business. These core values, taken from our Mission Statement, hang in all our offices and are repeated in all our company meetings. I think this is very important since it takes all members of your team to uphold what you consider important pillars of your business. The values that make up your business ethics must be shared and repeated often for them to have real meaning. But the real key is putting them into active practice. Jane Addams suggests that "Action indeed is the sole medium of expression for ethics."

Our core values are the bullet points for the way in which we want to conduct our interaction with everyone with whom we come in contact: our clients, our employees, our vendors, and our stake holders. The core values are: **Integrity, Respect, Safety, Purposeful Effort, and Exceed Expectations.** When decisions are held up against these ideals the outcome is much easier to see. And, since we really guard these as truths

for our company's behavior, it gets us all on the same page in group behavior. Anyone who compromises their actions by not following the foundations of our business ethics stands out like a sore thumb and gets noticed for the wrong reasons.

Integrity is always doing the right thing for people in a truthful way. Sometimes we don't always do *things right*. But when we make a mistake, we don't hide, cover it up or run. We go out of our way to make it right, and then some. It is somewhat surprising, and a sad statement on our society, how impressed and overjoyed people are when we do, for a second time, what we should have done the first time with no fanfare. We get customers for life because we turned a mistake into a marvel. That same principal holds for the advertising we do. No gimmicks, no hype, and no come-ons. This represents how we want to be known in the community. Holding decisions about pricing, commission structure, rates of pay, warranties, etc. up to the integrity test will help guide the outcome of the question. Is this the right thing to do and not just our right to do this? Potentially, these two questions can have very different answers.

Respect is easy show to someone who is about to hand you money and consummate a sale. But showing and expecting respect to the people you work closely with is absolutely essential to build trust and ethical behavior in the workplace. It's funny how easy it is to not make an effort around the people who know you best or the ones we love. We know they accept us as we are. But being lax around the people who represent the image that the company wants to portray sends the wrong message about how to act to the outside world. Actually showing respect, with a caring attitude, towards people's feelings, ideas, concerns, time, and contributions elevates the entire organization. For instance, being on time to meetings, paying attention to someone and not acting distracted, valuing their input to a problem even if they don't have the solution all show respect for the individual. Why should someone show respect to a customer if they don't feel they receive any respect at work?

Safety may not sound like a value statement but I believe it ties right back into respect and integrity. I never wish to knowingly put someone in harm's way on the job just because a quicker/cheaper/faster way to perform it compromises their safety. I want all our people to respect life over profits and understand that those two ideas are not mutually exclusive but that, in fact, a safe workplace actually costs less to operate. Safety, therefore, is an investment in our people and their families since coming back to work healthy, **the next day**, is our goal. All our people know that they have the right to call a supervisor to evaluate what they consider to be an unsafe situation. We have had to walk away from clients due to unsafe working conditions and their refusal to take corrective actions. Our people see that we put into action what we say in our meetings. We have an extensive safety program, and are always looking to improve it, that brings this topic to the top of everyone's mind and we invest in it throughout the year. (See the on-line archives for the Safety Bucks article.)

Purposeful Effort. Why didn't we just say Effort? I believe there is a significant difference between *activity* and *productivity*. Not aiming your effort in the right direction can lead to a lot of activity with very few results; or even the wrong results. Understanding your purpose in the life of the company will help direct your activity and turn it into productivity, gaining ground on the challenges before you. Again, showing respect to our fellow employees and customers by not wasting their valuable time is a virtue that helps not only each person involved but brings more efficiency to the organization. Ethics and their roots have practical applications for business beyond just a statement on a paper.

Exceeding Expectations is something we want to do to set ourselves apart from the rest of the competition. If we say we can fix your comfort problem, show up on the day we said we would, arrive when we said we would, fix the problem and get paid for it, my great grandmother would have given us a letter grade of C. All we did was meet an expectation and do exactly what we said we were in business for; nothing more and hopefully nothing less. This can also apply to our employees. If we tell you to show up for 40 hours and we pay you for 40 hours we have met our legal obligation. We want people to want to come to work. It is called work and not "coming to fun." I'm not sugar coating the fact that we have to have our game on when we are here. But I do want people to enjoy being here and look forward to the day with our team. The little extras we do through our Joy Committee and some of the surprises that happen on a random basis make the days a little lighter from time to time. Above all, showing respect and recognizing the value each person brings to the team go such a long way in making the atmosphere more enjoyable at work. Public recognition for accomplishments when people exceed the expectations of a customer, a vendor, or a fellow team mate reinforces the desire to reach higher and do more than is expected. The practical impact on the company's performance is measured by our growing customer base from referrals and the longevity of clients and employees alike.

The ethics employed by any business is a direct reflection of the ethics and morals of the leadership. For the company, ethics are top-down driven. If what is printed and what is practiced are not in alignment, what is practiced wins every time. Actions do speak louder than words. To me, growing and leading a business is much like parenting a child: They (employees and children) will behave in a fashion that is modeled before them. Words on a paper and out of a mouth have little meaning if not followed up with action. The foundation of a business, any organization or even relationship, is built on principles that must not crumble, even under stress. Like it or not, we are on stage 24 hours a day, every day. As a business leader, people are always watching us to see if the decisions we make are in line with what we say. If they are not, we cannot expect our team to behave the way we say we want them to. They will behave as we do. Holding strong to principles means making some very tough and painful decisions from time to time. But yielding to a momentary easy way out will have lasting consequences that can undermine the foundations already laid for the company. The principles by which you choose to run the company should, and will, permeate all policies and procedures for the team.

If your company has a set of values it lives by but you haven't highlighted them and held them up to the entire team, may I suggest you do so. It is a powerful exercise and, coupled with transparency and actions that exemplify the mission of your company, can be transforming for everyone involved. When members of your team really internalize the values that are held in the highest esteem, almost instantly a peer to peer check and balance is developed. The quality of the workforce that is attracted improves and the reputation for how things are done at your company spreads quickly.

I enjoy my sleep. I, like you, have certain things that keep me up at night from time to time. I don't need to add one more reason to lose sleep by compromising the core values I hold dear. We must be true to ourselves and reflect that to our people. We all have to look at ourselves in the mirror. In fact, I'll leave you with one of my favorite poems: The Face in the Glass by Dale Wimbrow:

The Face In The Glass!

When you get what you want in your struggle for self
And the world makes you king for a day,
Just go to a mirror and look at yourself
And see what THAT face has to say.

For it isn't your father or mother or spouse
Whose judgment upon you must pass;
The person whose verdict counts most in your life
Is the one staring back from the glass.

Some people might think you are a straight-shootin' chum
And call you a wonderful guy or gal,
But the face in the glass says you're only a bum
If you can't look it straight in the eye.
That's the one you must please, never mind all the rest,
For that's the one with you clear up to the end.
And you know you have passed your most dangerous test
If the face in the glass is your friend.
You may fool the whole world down the pathway of life
And get pats on your back as you pass,
But your final reward will be heartache and tears
If you've cheated the face in the glass.

Dale Wimbrow