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Everyday ethics: It's child's play

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The difference between ethics and compliance—

and why understanding
the difference is critical
to successful leaders

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Everyday ethics: It's child's play

BY WALTER E. JOHNSON

As a child, I grew up playing all sorts of outside games. Most of the time, I played with several cousins and neighbors. Often, we would have new players. Typically, new players were schoolmates visiting from other neighborhoods or visiting family or friends associated with my neighbors. Most times, our activities consisted of uninterrupted, endless fun.

When our activities included new players, there was potential for a delay of game. Usually, delays were the result of a player questioning another player's integrity when they lost. Here are a couple of examples: If they lost a race, they would say another runner's foot was either on or beyond the starting line. In Hide and Go Seek, they would say the person's eyes weren't closed completely or they looked up while they were running away. It doesn't matter the game, they found a way to question another player's integrity.

In *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, Buckingham shares a story about his five-year-old son.¹ Buckingham's son is a college football fan and has a favorite team. His son enjoys watching his favorite team as long as they are winning. When his team is losing, he has to leave the room or turn off the television. The author believes that no amount of effort will change his son's behavior and that this behavior will follow him into adulthood.

According to the author, childhood behavior transitions into adulthood. If this theory is correct, we can expect similar behavior in the marketplace regardless of the industry. Why? Childhood



friends and schoolmates become working professionals. When an organization experiences an increase in revenues, clients/customers, and market share, they may encounter similar behavior. What does that mean? Organizations should expect some competitors to question their integrity and the validity of their compliance and ethics programs. Competitors question marketing campaigns and some threaten with subpoenas and litigation. It's business and not much different than child's play.

In the *48 Laws of Power*, Greene discusses using smoke screens to distract competitors from their intentions.² Additionally, he states that a person who believes that they are winning hearts by being honest and open are greatly deluded. He states being open makes it impossible to be respected so lay honesty aside to achieve power. Maxwell believes that abuse of power is one of five categories that undermines the Golden Rule and results in many of the scandals we are witnessing.³

Just imagine that questioning another's integrity can be a distraction used to persevere in a competition. Losing focus on objectives and focusing on competition is one way to succumb to distraction. For example, I remember checking more than once to ensure my feet and hands were behind the line before racing. In addition to checking myself, I would look over to ensure my competitors were behind the line, also. Before I knew it, the race began and I wasn't in first or second place.

Perhaps, individuals or organizations that have a genuine interest in learning and establishing best practices pose questions of integrity. Their perception triggers their

curiosity so at conferences, tradeshow, and other events they attempt to gain information. These interactions tend to reinforce that good intentions are being observed and receiving recognition. This is great but excessive pride can be a distraction, also. In this context, distractions can be a false sense of accomplishment or failure to recognize the need for improvement. By the way, Maxwell ideas pride as a category that undermines the Golden Rule.



What do children do?

In retrospect, we learned to focus on our objectives, which were to have fun and play fair. We were transparent about rules. We shared our rules, which may or may not have varied from other neighborhoods, at the start of each game. The purpose was to avoid the impression that rules and exceptions were provided intermittently throughout the day to create a neighborhood advantage. Quickly, we learned that some players used distractions to compensate for their lack of skills or dedication to improve their performance. The players were



in the game but rarely considered as part of the competition. In some races, we gave them head-starts and occasionally they won, but most times they lost. This made the neighborhood kids push harder and gave them bragging rights when they beat a player that had a head start.

What can organizations do?

Although organizations are complex, most scenarios are elementary despite individual (and often, collective) efforts to make them complex. When it comes to compliance and ethics programs, organizations have regulations that provide guidance. This is similar to having a head start. Numerous resources exist for organizations to have a baseline to reference for developing a reputable program. For many organizations, their objective is to go beyond regulations and establish an ethical culture. They are passionate about their integrity and aren't distracted by the thought competitors questioning their integrity. Solutions may not be readily available but they can refer to a documented process that supports their decisions.

They invest in their infrastructure and document with due diligence. They communicate and make their plan accessible so that activities are transparent throughout the organization. To the extent possible, they are prepared to share their plan with regulators. Unfortunately, there are others that communicate commitment but demonstrate little effort. Their focus is on short-term gains that result in long-term losses. They represent a baseline to avoid. These organizations appear to be competition but they are not in the game. Like child's play, they are a temporary distraction attempting to prevent ethical organizations from achieving their objectives. ■

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Marcus Buckingham: *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*. Free Press. New York. 2007.
- 2 Robert Greene: *The 48 Laws of Power*. Penguin Books, The Penguin Group. New York 2000
- 3 John Maxwell: *Ethics 101: What every leader needs to know*. Center Street, Hachett Book Group. New York. 2003.