

ETHICS Debunking the 'Top 10' ethics myths

by Donna Davis, Director, Ethics & Business Conduct

Myth #1: *Actions are either right or wrong—there is no middle ground.*

If only it were that simple. In fact, most situations are not clear-cut. Each is uniquely impacted by multiple variables. Employees must gather relevant information and make decisions based on company-prescribed standards. If information is lacking, or the decision remains ambiguous, experts throughout the sector should be called on to assist.

Myth #2: *Most people do the right thing naturally.*

In truth, business ethics is learned through social interactions, training and practice. Asking questions, having a working knowledge of policies and procedures in Command Media, and practical experience enable employees to act ethically with ease.

Myth #3: *Good employees don't do bad things.*

Even with sound policies, procedures, training and management support, good employees can still make mistakes. If this occurs, prompt disclosure and corrective action are what is most important. The most severe ethics violations in history have involved extensive 'cover-ups.'

Myth #4: *Ethics can't be learned in the office.*

While this may or may not be true for personal ethics, it certainly does not apply to business ethics.

Business ethics programs establish standards of behavior based on organization culture. Northrop Grumman's Standards of Business Conduct outlines what is expected of all employees and provides minimally acceptable standards relative to our Corporate Values and business requirements.

Myth #5: *The actions of co-workers are none of my business.*

Every employee can directly impact the company's future success. As a result, everyone in the organization is worthy of your concern. Difficult as it may be, we are expected to get involved. This is especially true when a co-worker's actions threaten our success. How you get involved is your decision. You may talk to the co-worker directly, speak with local management or your Human Resources generalist or contact the Ethics Office.

Myth #6: *I have to do whatever my superiors tell me to do.*

History tells us that following orders is not a defense for illegal or unethical action. Moreover, we can take comfort in knowing that our business culture rewards those who 'challenge up,' and our company does not tolerate reprisal aimed at individuals who identify compliance issues. If you are uncertain about a situation, or something just doesn't feel right, ask...and keep on asking until you feel satisfied with the information you receive.

Myth #7: *Customer satisfaction means giving customers anything they want, no matter what.*

Customer satisfaction equates to delivery of quality products and services on time and at competitive prices. It does not provide for exceptions to laws or policies.

Myth #8: *Women are more ethical than men.*

There is no empirical evidence to support this claim. Women are involved in fewer violations; however, employment distribution statistics (i.e., number and types of jobs held) appear to explain this observation.

Myth #9: *It's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.*

This may be true in some situations; however, it definitely does not hold so for compliance. Errors can be costly—financially, as well as in other ways. Compliance organizations, such as law, export management, security and safety exist for valid reasons. Employees should always solicit expertise on compliance issues prior to acting on the company's behalf.

Myth #10: *I can't change the system; I'm only one person.*

This is a classic response that extends well beyond the workplace. Again, reflecting on significant events and people in history, we know that one person can make a difference. It is essential that each of us feels like owners of the company and believe that we can make a difference—individually and as a team.

