

# Are you an 'ethics activist'?

**'Ethics activists' is a wonderful phrase coined by ethics specialist, Cynthia Schoeman from Ethics Monitor. I recently attended one of her talks and one of the things that resounded with me was that she encouraged everyone to be ethics activists.**



Cynthia asked, “There are many people that have been activists for more than just a day, a week, a month, a year; for decades, people have fought against so many wrongs in the world. What would the world look like if we all took on the role of being an ethics activist?”

Indeed, what would our society, governments and organisations look like if ethical behaviour was non-negotiable, and formed the crux of all of our decisions? I have and do often, refer to Rotary’s four-way test. Of the things we think, say and do: One: Is it the truth? Two: Is it fair to all concerned? Three: Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Four: Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Having just finished reading Pieter-Louis Myburgh’s book, *The Republic of Gupta* some serious questions are raised about ethical leadership. It frightens me to see what examples are being set and regarded as acceptable, normal business behaviour. Bell Pottinger’s role and association with the Guptas is a case in point. They seem to think that blaming and firing a few staff coupled with an apology is going to solve the havoc they have caused.

When I facilitate reputation management training sessions, one of the key elements and first building blocks we delve into that sets the tone of an organisational reputation, is corporate management. This consists of two elements, namely the organisation’s strategic intent and operational governance. Strategic intent is the vision, mission and values, which help to get everyone onto the same page in order to know where they are going. The second element, operational governance, includes policies, processes and importantly, leadership. Part and



parcel of these two elements are ethics that need to be ingrained in the organisation's DNA.

The reason I say it needs to be ingrained is that you cannot have one set of values at home and one in the work place. If you do, you'll be caught out, your authenticity will be questioned and your reputation will be ruined.

At one of these training sessions, a participant asked me what you should do if you didn't quite agree with your boss' principles? The job is great and the benefits aren't bad, but on a level of shared values, there was a chasm. The question back at the person was how would they feel about a billboard announcing the dubious behaviour and linking their name to it? One of my favourite Warren Buffet quotes that relates to a leader's actions is, "I want them [CEOs] to judge every action by how it would appear on the front page of their local newspaper, written by a smart but semi-unfriendly reporter, who really understood it, to be read by their families, their neighbours, their friends. And it has to pass that test."

Associating with the wrong crowd and even your boss may have quite a detrimental impact on your own reputation and career. Only you can decide what is right or wrong for you and with everything in this life, it is about choices.

As Cynthia says, we all have a built-in radar of what is right and wrong. Your choices are either going to be ethical or not. In the vast majority of cases, there is no in-between option as the distinction between right and wrong is perfectly clear.

When it comes to creating an ethical team, department or company Cynthia adds, "It warrants that ethics is included as an important

goal that is actively managed, supported and recognised. Expecting on-going ethical conduct without such meaningful engagement with employees is, frankly, wishful thinking. Given the range of challenges and improper personal agendas that can arise, regular engagement is necessary to ensure employees' understanding and to maintain their commitment to ethical practices."

Delving a bit further into the great concept of "ethics activist" that Cynthia has coined, I asked her how you could recognise an ethics activist? Cynthia explains, "Recognising an ethics activist is generally easy. It's the person who, in addition to acting ethically at all times, also speaks up for what is ethical at every opportunity and stands up against every incident of misconduct. This makes an important contribution to furthering ethics, but it is not without its challenges. As for most activists, ethics activists can be the target of those who would wish to silence them. Crucially, therefore, an ethics activist needs both commitment and courage to weather any opposition."

Imagine for a moment, you are already an ethics activist in your company. How would you then behave compared to the way you do currently? Where will you need to stand up for what is right and face opposition? Although these questions warrant some time for reflection, the result of such thought will help you to see how important it is to protect your reputation by being an ethics activist. After all, no one wants to be associated with a company acting unethically when it is plastered over the front page of every newspaper. At the end of the day, the truth and doing the right thing will always prevail. ▲

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