

Code Complacency

If you don't already have a code of conduct in your organization, you're probably considering one. Most people and organizations feel that codes are useful tools. But too often organizations reassure themselves that they have the area of ethics covered because a code exists. They assume that writing and distributing a code of conduct translates into ethical behaviour. It doesn't take much to blow this assumption out of the water – Enron's widely discussed code of ethics did little to affect ethical decision-making.

A necessary piece of the ethics puzzle

A code of conduct is a document that defines acceptable interpersonal and ethical standards in a workplace. Organizations use codes of conduct to educate employees and guide them in their decision-making. Ideally codes of conduct:

- clearly define what is acceptable and unacceptable
- offer guidance to people when they are faced with difficult decisions
- provide a procedure for how complaints will be handled
- set a high ethical standard to create a safe and respectful workplace

The Conference Board of Canada's 2003 National Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Report found that 94% of the 53 companies surveyed had a code of conduct / business ethics. Another study put the figure at closer to 60%. Some organizations choose instead to align themselves with industry-specific or global codes and standards rather than create their own. Chartered Accountants agree to abide by the *Code of Ethics of Chartered Accountants*, so many do not feel the need to duplicate this with a separate company-specific code. In all of these cases, a majority of organizations view a code of conduct as a necessary piece of the ethics puzzle.

Complacency is an issue

The problem with codes is complacency. The existence of a code has lulled many organizations into a false sense of security. The root of the problem lies in the assumption that we all share the same values. The reality is that with our varied backgrounds, upbringings and cultures, we don't all view situations through the same lens. It is unlikely that we will all interpret and integrate the tenets of a code of conduct in the same way.

The way that organizations avoid this complacency is to design and implement sustainable learning initiatives that provide employees with the tools and motivation to make decisions according to the code of conduct. They ensure that all employees participate and that new employees are quickly scheduled for training. Learning initiatives, combined with clear complaint procedures that are encouraged and adhered to, result in informed employees who can align their decisions to the organizations code of conduct.