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Absolutes and Ethical Relativism in the Workplace

By Mark S. Putnam

Any ethical system, whether it involves codes of conduct, company rules, or legalities, will fail if the people who are making and following it do not adhere to an ethical code that is rooted in moral absolutes. But talking about "moral absolutes" is a touchy subject, especially in a business context. Rather than talk about it directly, we tend to prefer a simple crime and punishment approach to dealing with ethics. For the most part, this model gets the desired behavior but it doesn't go below the surface to give employees the whys behind the issue. Herein lies the problem. We need to face the reality of moral absolutes and reject the ethical relativism that creeps in to undermine them.

This is controversial territory because we can't get past some basic philosophical questions that block our path. Whose morals are absolute? Should someone dictate morality? How can we accommodate the diversity of people at work? Isn't morality a personal, religious, or philosophical issue? Well in actuality, the workplace is precisely where the discussion of moral absolutes should take place because no arena needs it more desperately.

Imagine a world with ethical codes devoid of moral absolutes. What does that leave you with? What remains, are only good intentions, hollow expectations, and nice sounding ideas. The only thing that provides any semblance of order is brute force. But, who wants to work in a place like that? A workplace cannot be a police state nor can it be so permissive that it undermines the success of the company. It must maintain a balance between the ethical expectations of the employer and the character of the individual. When both have their ethical foundations built on absolute principles, they are in sync and they will counter the problem of ethical relativism.

Let's get to the point. Moral absolutes are a reality that must be dealt with. Ethical relativism undermines the whole thing and should be rejected. Unfortunately, for those who are afraid to delve into this area, there isn't much middle ground to retreat to.

Let's start out with some definitions and examples. What is ethical relativism? If you know what situational ethics is, you have seen ethical relativism in action. It is the notion that there are no moral absolutes or no moral rights and wrongs. Instead, right and wrong are based on social norms - that is, whatever our society or culture says is right or wrong. Ethical relativism holds to the notion that morals have evolved and changed over time, and therefore are not absolute.

Now, one might wonder if moral relativism is all that bad? On the surface we might be inclined to err on the relativistic side since we all have different ethical standards, perspectives, experiences, and feelings. It only seems natural



to allow freedom of choice and diversity to have their say. But a closer look reveals that we humans are a lot more alike in this regard than we think.

Look around you and you'll see the evidence of this everywhere. Our diverse society shares a surprising amount of common moral beliefs. No matter which presidential candidate you voted for, what religion you are, or your position in life, your basic moral standards of right and wrong are much the same. These are not "social norms" but moral absolutes. Stealing is wrong. Lying is wrong. Honesty, patience, dependability, fairness, and responsibility are right. You can take these moral absolutes to the bank. If you grab on to them and wrap yourself in them, you will be following a model of success that has stood the test of time. When you focus like a laser beam on what is good and right and take out all the emotion and distraction, what remains are pure moral absolutes that are universal to all humanity.

The challenge for us is to latch on to these moral absolutes in a busy, hectic, morally-mushy business world. Think of the famous scene in the Green Bay Packers locker room when coach Vince Lombardi held up a football and said, "Men, this is a football." His point was that there is a time when we need to focus on the basics. So, what is honesty? What is good? These are the basics. Shoot toward them, drive toward them, and strive with all your might to move toward them. Moral absolutes are not your enemy. They must not be on the bench but on the field, in uniform, and a part of your game plan for success.

In the long run, moral relativism doesn't really help you. When you're facing a tough situation at work, grab on to the security of timeless moral absolutes. It's a matter of getting back to basics, getting rid of the emotion and self-interest. Be convinced that there are moral absolutes and close the door on ethical relativism. Believe it or not, there is a place for this topic in the workplace. It's been there all along but we've been too busy to notice.