



Ethics Codes Don't Make People Ethical

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Michael Josephson in his e-letter write, “In the wake of a continual parade of scandals, there has been a lot of talk concerning codes of ethics. I’ve written dozens of codes and have a healthy respect for their value as an element of a corporate culture, but I wince at the unreasonable expectations attached to these documents.

“First of all,” Josephson states, ethics codes don’t make people ethical. They don’t make bad people good. Nor do they make people with poor judgment wise. An ethics code would not have prevented most of the objectionable behavior we’ve seen in recent years.

“You see, there are two aspects to ethics: DISCERNMENT (knowing right from wrong) and DISCIPLINE (having the moral willpower to do what’s right). A code can help define what’s right and acceptable and provide a basis for improving sanctions on those who don’t follow it. But unless it reinforces an established ethical culture, it won’t do much to assure that people do what’s right.

“It’s proper and prudent,” explains Josephson, “to clarify obligations under existing laws and establish standards of conduct in areas not governed by law. In effect, ethics codes transform one’s perspective of a moral obligation into a binding rule....To the extent we need more clarity, we need more codes. To the extent we need more character, we need a lot more.”

