



On-the-job training ground

Practical lessons in ethical workplace behavior

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

I stood with my dad in the college chapel office where he had poured out his life for the past decade, studying to preach, preparing to teach and counseling troubled students.

Pop had come to Parsons College in 1963 as religion/philosophy professor and associate campus pastor, just when the Presbyterian-affiliated institution started to emerge from the pack of small-town schools in Iowa. By the mid-1960s, Parsons had become the largest private college in the state, with a student body topping 5,000.

The enrollment expansion led to a building boom that led to overspending and loss of

accreditation. Staff and faculty layoffs followed, with the survivors pulling double duty — or more. By that day in my dad's office in June 1973, he served not only as campus pastor and religion and philosophy professor, but alumni director and housing director as well.

Although on the ropes, Parsons had regained accreditation. So the announcement of the school's immediate closing left students and teachers stunned. As I helped Pop pack up his library of theology and philosophy books a day later, I watched a man a month shy of his 57th birthday facing sudden unemployment.

I began to load up a box with

some stationery embossed with the Parsons College emblem. Pop looked puzzled.

"What are you doing with those?" he asked.

"Just going to use them for scratch paper," I replied, proud of my thriftiness.

"That doesn't belong to me," he said. "It belongs to the creditors."

"But they'll probably just throw it in a Dumpster," I tried to reason.

"That's not the point," Pop told me. "It's their property."

I didn't take the stationery.

And every pen, staple and paper clip remained behind in that office as well.

More than 30 years later I haven't forgotten that ethics lesson my father taught me. Over the years I also remember him keeping scrupulously detailed records of car mileage on visitations to see parishioners in out-of-town hospitals. While the IRS never came to check out his records, I suspect Pop had a stronger motivation: staying accountable before God.

From the number of news articles I see regularly about ethical lapses — or maybe I should call them ethical chasms — we need to be reminded every now and then to do the right thing. Daily it seems I run across accounts of how government, business or church officials are in legal trouble for violating some clearly defined regulation.

Certainly as evangelical Christians most of us do a pretty good job avoiding "big" sins such as alcohol, gambling and adultery. But why is it that in our

workplaces — where we spend much of our waking hours — we appear to have just as difficult a time resisting temptation as the non-Christians around us?

"Christians know what is right," says Gary R. Allen, Ministerial Enrichment national coordinator for the Assemblies of God. "But they often have the perception that if they're honest it will cost them — their image, position, money or self-esteem."

Our actions should line up with God's standards rather than the subpar ideology of the worker at the next desk. A parable of Jesus tells it best: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10, NIV).

AN ONGOING PATTERN?

From the actions of some Christians caught in wrongdoing, it's clear they graduated to larger malfeasance once no one noticed the small compromises they had made.

According to a recent CareerBuilder.com survey, 19 percent of workers admit telling lies at the office at least weekly. The most common reasons for lying are to appease a customer, to cover up a missed deadline, to explain a late arrival, to protect another employee or to get a co-worker into trouble.

Allen says employees frequently have a sense of entitlement. Workers may feel because the company isn't paying them what they really deserve, they should try to bridge the gap by creating

ethics

their own perquisites.

Sometimes we fall into a little-white-lie pattern that is so entrenched we become callous to how we're acting. Following are some ways employees stray. While some are illegal, all are plainly deceitful.

- Taking sick days when you feel fine just because the benefit is available.

- Making photocopies for personal items because "it really doesn't cost the company anything."

- Talking to your spouse on the phone for half an hour daily, even though the company manual forbids personal calls.

- Staying out for lunch an extra half-hour when the boss is away on a business trip.

- Checking out vacation Web sites while you are supposed to be working.

- Making long-distance personal phone calls from the firm's phone.

- Copying information from the Internet for a company report and passing it off as your own work.

- Padding an expense account because "everybody does it."

- Falsifying company reports because your manager has threatened to dismiss you if you don't.

WAYS OF THE WORLD

Most Christians know how to keep up appearances of being honest. We're not going to walk out of the office carrying a file cabinet. But is that belief based on our conviction that stealing is wrong or simply because we don't want to get caught?

For Christian ethics to be meaningful, a person must have determined in his or her heart beforehand to act honestly, whatever the situation. Ethics

is characterized by how we act when no one else is watching.

Often the motivation to cheat is to get ahead. The athlete who uses illegal performance-enhancing drugs desires to sign a bigger contract. The author who made up accounts in an autobiographical book hopes to land a spot on *Oprah*. The politician who accepts bribes from defense contractors wants to secure a sound financial retirement.

We've long been accustomed to politicians, sports figures and actors not leveling with us. A troubling trend these days is the number of spiritual leaders involved in misconduct. On a recent day scanning the Associated Press religion wire I came across these typical stories:

A minister arrested for third time trying to solicit a female undercover police officer in a prostitution sting.

A pastor indicted on federal fraud charges of inappropriately using \$330,000 from a Justice Department grant intended to operate halfway houses for prison inmates.

A priest pleads guilty to storing hundreds of images of child pornography on his computer.

When people develop a comfortable pattern of unethical deeds, it often results in assessing our actions as less onerous than the next person's.

William Reddin, a Wisconsin attorney representing a client charged with offering free cosmetic surgeries to women in exchange for sexual intercourse, criticized Milwaukee police in March for wasting resources on such a trivial matter. "These seem like relatively harmless situations in a city where they have over 100 homicides a year," he told the AP.

A domestic policy adviser

to the president resigned his position just before police filed felony charges accusing him of fraudulently returning items to Target stores at least 25 times. The adviser had been the epitome of a conservative Christian, active in a nondenominational church with his wife, who homeschools their four children.

Former Enron Chairman Ken Lay served as a leader at his church before being convicted on fraud and conspiracy charges. Ex-WorldCom CEO Bernard Ebbers, a Sunday School teacher, was convicted last year of fraud and conspiracy in the biggest accounting scandal in U.S. corporate history.

SHIFTING STANDARDS

Fueled by the Internet and reality television programs, we

live in a nation where millions lie habitually. They tell white lies, whoppers to cover up untruths and more fibs to "help" someone else.

Gary Allen says it's more difficult to maintain standards in today's environment where many people believe there is no such attribute as absolute truth. "The attitudes we've developed to tolerance and individualism have eaten away at ethical standards," he says.

A study of nearly 25,000 high school students by the Josephson Institute of Ethics found that in the past year 83 percent had copied another student's homework, 82 percent had lied to a parent about something significant and 62 percent had cheated on an exam. Nevertheless, 92 percent of these students claimed to be satisfied with their ethics and character.

There is a troubling disconnect



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between what we believe is right and how we act.

Allen notes there are 50 scriptural references to doing “what is right,” and the Bible must be a Christian’s primary tool for discernment. Multiple selections in Proverbs and Psalms deal with ethics in the workplace. In addition, 1 John 3:10 says, “Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God.”

Hebrews 4:13 states, “Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

And Colossians 3:23 proclaims, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”

Beyond breaking God’s commands, lying can have severe

consequences in everyday life. For instance, the recent CareerBuilder.com survey showed that one in four hiring managers had fired an employee for being dishonest.

TRANSFORMING THE WORKPLACE

Os Hillman, author of *The 9 to 5 Window: How Faith Can Transform the Workplace*, says the number of corporate scandals has resulted in more openness to spirituality at work. As such, Christians on the job have the opportunity to stand out with their words and deeds rather than blend in with common practices that aren’t necessarily ethical.

“For Christians in the workplace, it’s so important that what we say matches what we do,”

Hillman says. “If we don’t show up on time, if we don’t deliver on what we say we’re going to do, if we don’t abide by the rules, it’s really an affront to the gospel.”

Hillman believes the workplace is a great environment for a Christian to be light because there can be so much darkness — from character assassination of a competitive co-worker to cutting corners on quality in an effort to appease a cost-conscious boss. Christians who don’t have a moral compass guiding their work decisions can easily compromise integrity.

There are three basic types of Christian workers, Hillman says. There are those who fail to integrate their faith life with their work life. They are dissatisfied with their jobs and are basically working

to survive. Without a purpose or meaning in employment, they won’t change corporate culture.

A second type of Christian worker adheres to Christian principles — at least on paper. Hillman says the ethics guidelines and mission statement in place at Enron could have been adopted by any Christian company. “They said all the right things but they didn’t live them,” he says.

Finally there are employees who live by the power of the Holy Spirit, listening to God’s voice in their working life in order to discern right from wrong. “As people begin to live by the power of the Holy Spirit in their work life it can have a transformational impact upon the workplace,” Hillman says.

Certainly the same ethics guiding employees should apply to Christian employers.

A big-city daily newspaper I once worked for had a Christian owner. In a newsroom full of skeptical and cynical atheists, I represented a rarity: a Pentecostal.

Unfortunately, the owner’s conduct didn’t improve my colleagues’ impression of the born-again crowd. The owner made promises to employees, but they never came through.

I’ll never forget the day I left the newspaper after being hired by a Christian magazine. I showed the details of the generous benefit package of my new employer to one of my co-workers, a woman who had no pension plan and hadn’t received a raise in a

decade at the newspaper.

“Wow!” she said in all earnestness. “You mean there really are Christian companies that treat their employees right?”

If we profess to be Christian, we had better act like it in business. It’s difficult to win over a wary public if we claim to be spiritual but our actions have been permanently molded by the world around us.

My dad died four years ago. But as I pause to reflect today, on what would have been his 90th birthday, his advice seems as timely as ever. **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

ethics

I OPENING

Mohammed:

- Three years’ education
- Prays five times a day
- Believes Jesus was a good Muslim
- No one has ever told him otherwise

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