

How to make New Year's resolutions for a healthy workplace

Each January we contemplate whether to begin the New Year with resolutions for a fresh start. Those resolutions vary, but they usually involve losing weight, eating healthful foods, getting regular exercise, keeping in touch with friends and family, or managing personal finances more prudently. Rarely do you hear a business leader say, "I think I am going to start the year fresh with a plan to ensure the workplace is ethical." Isn't that like resolving to work for world peace? What does that even mean? Where would a person start? How would you quantify the successfulness of your efforts? At least with personal resolutions you have the scale and heart monitors.



Strategies
Therese Pautz

Ethical organizations start with ethical leaders who hire and retain ethical people. Sounds obvious, yet it requires a long-term commitment to the people within the organization. It requires reflection and a determination to do what is right even if there are no measurable short-term gains. It is the long-term gains that count. The demise of organizations such as Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen — to name a few — was the result of an ethical spiral that did not happen overnight. When the organization's only focus is on profits and "winning," rather than the integrity of the people, products and relationships, it is destined for trouble. Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, has said, "In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence and energy. And if they don't have the first, the other two will kill you."

Ethics requires both the ability to discern right from wrong, but also the commitment and discipline to habitually do what is right and proper. One must: (1.) Say what you mean; (2.) Mean what you say; (3.) Know that the little things matter. This "high road" is not an easy road. As Zig Ziglar has said, "There's no traffic jam on the extra mile."

In developing and sustaining a healthy, ethical workplace an organization should:

1. Define values. What standards of ethics and integrity do you have in place in your organization (e.g. value statement, code of conduct)? Do they go beyond the law? Do these values guide everything in your organization?

2. Adopt and enforce policies. What policies and procedures are in place to ensure that people understand the organization's expectations and the procedures for communicating potential violations of the law and workplace policies? Start by doing the following:

- Integrate the value statement and policies in the handbook and provide at the time of hire, post in conspicuous locations and/or provide on the intranet.

- Secure executed acknowledgments (stating employees have received, reviewed, understood and agreed to abide by the organization's code of conduct and workplace policies and that they are unaware of any violations of such policies).

- Provide regular training.

- Clearly outline reporting procedures for suspected violations (with clear reporting options, e.g. multiple reporting options, compliance hotline, etc.).

- Conduct prompt, appropriate investigations of suspected violations of the law and policies.

- Use formal and informal resolution procedures.

- Take appropriate discipline or corrective action if warranted.

- Ensure confidentiality is maintained consistent with the law.

- Prohibit retaliation.

3. Communicate. Is communication of the organization's values and standards of ethics and integrity frequent, open and honest? Frequent communication should include opportunities for dialogue. Are there resources within the organization if people have questions about potentially unethical conduct (including those "gray areas") to get guidance or feedback without fearing and experiencing retaliation? Is it OK for people to admit they made a mistake?

4. Mandate role modeling and accountability. Do all the leaders of the organization consistently articulate and

model the values of the organization? Do they consistently treat all people (internally and externally) with integrity and act in an ethical manner? Are there different standards or rules depending upon who the person is or how he/she performs or affects the "bottom line"? Can anyone hold another person accountable for behavior that is contrary to the organization's values without fear of retaliation, regardless of the person's identity, position, financial contributions or relationships? If a person fails to demonstrate integrity in their work and dealings with others, is the organization committed to taking the appropriate corrective or remedial action to ensure that the values of the organization prevail?

5. Hire, promote and reward people of integrity. What does the organization do to ensure that it hires people of integrity? GE Chairman Jeffrey Immelt has said, "You have got to find a way to attract people who know how to give back to the environment, and give back to the community, and give back to the workplace." What is the organization doing to mentor and develop other leaders so that they articulate and model the values of the organization? Does the organization invest resources to develop leaders of integrity? Are there rewards, compensation and recognition for those persons, at all levels of the organization, who model ethical behavior and who hold people accountable who do not model the values of the organization?

Resolving to enhance the ethics of your organization ultimately will not only produce tangible benefits such as lower turnover and fewer legal claims, but also intangible benefits, such as retaining talented people who grow and flourish, which are essential to an organization's long-term success. Actions speak more than words. Will your resolutions turn into actions?

Therese Pautz is founder of NeuVest, a neutral third-party consultancy that works with companies to conduct investigations, provide training and/or mediate workplace resolutions. She can be reached at tpautz@neuvest.com