

In Depth

Executive team may benefit from outside coaching on ethics

Most successful leaders know how to avoid the obvious lapses, but even small mistakes can derail the success of a company, a department, or a career.

Paul Wolfowitz lost his job as head of the World Bank over concerns about his personal relationship with a bank employee. The CFO of Wellpoint Health was recently ousted after allegations surfaced about extramarital affairs.



Insider view

■ **Tom Floyd**

How do high performing, very smart people find themselves in these situations?

Can professional coaching assist executives in preventing ethical lapses before they occur? In many cases, professionals who specialize in coaching for character and ethics can help.

Unfortunately for many organizations, ethical lapses can occur in the form of placing personal interest over organizational interest, or in issues such as corporate bullying, lying, and sexual harassment. To minimize these situations, many companies are harnessing the power of these outside specialists to guide their leaders in both practicing ethical conduct and driving it from the top down.

Here's a glimpse at a few ways these character experts are keeping executives honest, ethical, and on the right path:

• **Reinforcing company values.**

An initial step for many ethics coaches involves having a series of dialogues with executives to discuss the company's values and meaning to the executive personally.

Sound unnecessary or simplistic? These conversations are critical.

According to a recent study by the Southern Institute of Professional Ethics,

the number one cause for employees' unethical conduct was the failure of the organization's leadership to tell their employees what's expected of them within their corporate culture. Executives can't be successful if they can't live up to what company values mean.

• **Self realization.**

Through a process of questioning, active listening, and role playing, many ethics coaches provide a confidential, safe outlet for executives to express and realize on their own that some behaviors may be destructive for both themselves and their companies.

"What are some of the reasons you're doing this?" "Do you feel that's in the best interest of the company?"

Whether it's not being entirely truthful about a business issue or being inappropriately involved with someone at the office, questions like these can help executives consider the consequences and come to a conclusion of "I need to stop doing this" before permanent damage is done.

• **Staying grounded.**

No one gets more positive reinforcement within an organization than its C-level executives. Surrounded by cheerleaders and employees eager to please, and many times for political reasons alone, executives can have a difficult time finding people on the inside who will question their actions. This is where coaches can help.

Ethics coaches strive to keep their executive clients grounded in reality, serving as professional devil's advocates, trusted counsel, and confidantes. Additionally, by working with executives to examine their inner circles at work, coaches can help leaders surround themselves with a diverse array of people who not only model the company's values but also won't be afraid to say "I think what you're doing is wrong."

• **Reporting unethical behavior.**

Some executives can mistakenly believe "My only job is to do the right thing myself." It's not.

In driving an ethics based culture, many coaches work with executives to help them understand that everybody contributes to a company's culture and success. Coaches

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can guide leaders in bringing a company's values to life, and are instrumental in getting their clients to proactively address situations that could damage the organization.

However some executives may not feel free to report unethical behavior within their organizations because they don't believe the company will do anything about it. Even worse, some leaders may fear retaliation.

In situations like this, coaches are invaluable guides to executives, counseling them on their legal and personal obligation to report unethical breaches or violations.

In many situations, having professional coaches available to help your leaders navigate morally challenging situations will not only save your company from financial, HR, and legal woes, it will ensure your executive team is practicing what you preach.

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