



# Can Business Ethics Be Taught?

From the headline-grabbing corporate scandals of Enron and WorldCom, to the fall-out from Sarbannes-Oxley, it's no secret that the business world has been plagued with corporate scandals in recent years.

As a result, consumer confidence and trust in a variety of industries has lapsed. When you combine this with recent headlines concerning government aid to troubled industries such as financial services, automotive and insurance, people have a right to be skeptical about who they do business with.

Customers are now expecting, demanding and receiving more accountability from their service providers. Those who aren't willing to embrace this new mode of thinking and position themselves as highly-principled companies are going to miss one of the decade's most significant paradigm shifts in business.

Ensuing ethical conduct throughout your organization and showcasing your commitment to business ethics is one way to maintain your organization's reputation and set yourself apart from your competitors. How important are ethics in today's business climate? Take a look at what MBA programs across the nation are doing:

- One in three programs requires course work in ethics, sustainability, and corporate social responsibility.
- The number of stand-alone ethics courses in MBA curricula has increased by 500 percent since 1988.
- Thirty-nine of the 50 schools have a center dedicated to ethics, corporate social responsibility, or sustainability.

Many organizations offer rudimentary professional development sessions on regulatory and compliance issues to their staff, but static training is not an indicator of behavioral change. Few take it a step further to showcase how individuals can apply this information during the course of a routine business day. This experiential gap is what, I believe, can make an ethics training program truly worthwhile and effective.

That's why Dr. Carol Orsborn, co-author of Trust Inc., recommends professionals include role-playing scenarios in their training programs. These scenarios should be written specifically for an organization based on discussions with management (and sometimes customers), and mirror actual issues that arise in the workplace. Others are taken from legal cases within a particular industry segment.

These "live fire" case scenarios have the greatest impact during training sessions. While many professionals are intrigued by basic information on legal and compliance issues, they are left wondering how it applies to real world situations. Many don't know what to do when a situation goes "beyond the law" into what might be considered a grey area. By making this portion of training interactive, the organization gives employees real world scenarios to explore with colleagues that make a lasting impact.

By the way, this type of training is effective for any size company.

For those who seek run highly principled companies, incorporating ethics training into your professional development curriculum is essential. However, to make it worthwhile, consider developing real world case studies to incorporate the fundamentals into your team's decision making process. Once you are done, make sure you tell your customers. Sharing your commitment to ethical standards helps to build trust and credibility for you and your company that will pay off in the long term.

Can ethics be taught? Absolutely.

*About the Author: Ann Subervi is President & CEO of Utopia Communications, Inc., an ethically focused public relations agency headquartered in Red Bank, NJ. A member of PRSA's Counselors Academy's executive committee, Ann is an endorsed trainer of Trust Inc.'s LEAP methodology for values based leadership in the United States.*

For more on ethics in the PR industry, visit her blog at [www.ethicaloptimist.com](http://www.ethicaloptimist.com).

331 Newman Springs Rd. • Building 1, Suite 143 • Red Bank, NJ 07701  
Toll Free: 1-888-321-UTOPIA (8867)

Offices in: Miami • Cincinnati • Houston • Denver • Walnut Creek





# Can Business Ethics Be Taught?

*Side Bar:*

## Tips for Implementing Organizational Ethics Training

- **CEO Driven:** Have the directive for training come from the top of the organization.
- **Mandatory Training:** Insist that training be mandatory for every employee with no exceptions.
- **Consistency:** Have a mechanism (in-person or Intranet) for annual updates/refreshers.
- **Start Right:** Consider starting with an ethics audit. This is an assessment of organizational ethics strengths and weaknesses with an emphasis on identification and correction of vulnerable areas..
- **Ask the Experts:** Develop your own ethical think tank using an expanded short-term advisory group consisting of impartial advisors drawn together as needed for ethical decision-making support on specific, pressing issues. Advisors could include CPA's, lawyers, trained university philosophers, industry specialists, government specialists, etc.
- **Ethics Code Development and Compliance Audit:** This organizational process is designed to engage all levels of employees in the formulation of a shared statement of corporate values as well as review of policies to ensure that they are in compliance with latest industry standards. (May involve outside legal consultation with affiliated firm.) The process, as much as the resulting document, furthers support of the creation of an ethical culture that is more than lip-service compliance. The resulting document can be used for reputation-enhancement purposes.