

ask the ethics guy!

We Need an Ethics Czar to Battle a Widespread Breakdown in Standards



Dr. Bruce Weinstein

By Dr. Bruce Weinstein, Ph.D.

Energy Czar. Health Reform Czar. Technology Czar. Green Czar. President Barack Obama continues to line up an impressive array of policy leaders to tackle our ever-mounting social and economic problems. Tough times call for creative solutions, and the president is right to look for the best and the brightest to heal our battered economy and bruised infrastructure.

But there is one kind of problem the Obama Administration has yet to tackle, even though it may be the most pervasive one of all. It is a distressing issue about which everyone complains but no one has been able to address effectively: The widespread failure of our leaders – and the rest of us – to take ethics seriously.

What we need is an Ethics Czar.

According to the annual USA Today/Gallup Poll, less than one American in four rates highly the ethical standards of business executives, attorneys, members of Congress or stockbrokers. Bankers had it especially rough in the latest poll: Their approval rating fell from 35 percent to 23 percent. Even before the Blagojevich scandal hit the news, only 22 percent of Americans held state governors in high esteem.

A contempt for ethics lies at the heart of almost every top story of the day: Yankee hitter Alex Rodriguez admitting to steroid use, investor Bernard L. Madoff confessing to running the largest Ponzi scheme in history, a report by the Josephson Institute stating that 64 percent of high school students cheat and 30 percent steal. As I have argued repeatedly in this column, however, striving to live an ethical life isn't just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do, too.

I therefore propose my top nominee for Ethics Czar: You.

That's right. Whether you're the CEO of a global corporation, a mid-level manager, or an entrepreneur striking out in this difficult economy, you are the one who should set high standards in your organization and do your level best to live up to them.

In fact, being the Ethics Czar applies not just to how you lead your organization, but also to how you lead your life. I hereby offer six simple rules for ethical leadership at work, with your family and friends, and in your community.

A CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ETHICS CZARS

1. LEAD BY EXAMPLE

The most effective way to promote ethical behavior is to demonstrate it in all that you do. When members of your team see that you tell the truth when it would be easier to be dishonest, or react to a stressful situation with compassion rather than hostility, or own up to your mistakes rather than blaming someone else, they not only have a model for making the right choices – they have the motivation to do it, too. Anyone can take the low road, but it takes a person of character to take the high road consistently, or at least attempt to do so. Show your team that you are such a person.

2. PRAISE GENEROUSLY

When was the last time you told someone she was doing a good job? Yes, it's important for managers to let employees know when they've gotten off track. But it may be even more important to tell people when they've done something right. After all, people will give you their best if they feel appreciated. One of the many useful lessons I picked up at the Gallup Institute for Leadership is the value of writing brief notes to those who have done something beneficial for me. Even a one-line e-mail saying something like, "You handled that situation brilliantly," will make someone's day. As long as it comes from the heart, a little praise goes a long way.

3. CRITICIZE TO BUILD UP, NOT BREAK DOWN

Many of us view criticism as something we'd rather not give or receive. But this misses its real aim, which is to bring out the best in others and not merely instill feelings of guilt or remorse. It is appropriate for people to feel bad when they have done something wrong. Good managers know, however, that criticism is most effective when it leaves someone inspired to do better rather than stuck in feelings of inadequacy. It's in your own interest to take meaningful criticism seriously when you receive it, too.

4. BE KIND, UNWIND

The better angels of our nature are often the first casualties in the war of economic survival we're all fighting now. More than ever, it makes sense for managers to build stress-busters into the work week. Take the group out to lunch or have a brown-bag day for your team in the conference room with no work allowed. Let the staff go home early from time to time or celebrate their birthdays away from the office for the full day. Encourage team members to use, not hoard, their vacation days.

The value of relaxing on a regular basis applies to you as well. Granting time to unwind to others and yourself isn't an option for a good manager; it is an ethical obligation. After all, we can't serve the needs of our clients and employers if we're fried and overdue for a break. Having time to play for awhile is also a great way to apply [the ethical principle of love](#) and compassion to ourselves.

5. PUNISH FAIRLY

One measure of good managers is the extent to which anger influences the way they punish employees. It is human to be upset when a person you manage and trust lets you down, but you can and should rise above that anger, look objectively at what has occurred, and decide what the appropriate response should be. It's especially important to put aside whatever emotional turmoil you're going through that is unrelated to the problem at hand.

It's also critical to avoid favoritism when meting out punishment. There is no surer way to lower your team's morale than to give one errant employee a free pass after you have punished another employee who made the same mistake.

6. IF IT IS TO BE, IT'S UP TO THEE

When you see people doing things they shouldn't, take action. For example, when employee comes to work with the flu, sending them home is fair, it prevents harm, and it demonstrates that you care. Avoiding the matter helps no one, including you. If you overhear colleagues discussing confidential information in a public place, mention your concerns rather than ignoring the situation. If you get bad customer service, telling the manager instead of quietly seething about it means you at least have a shot at getting a positive result.

Don't assume problems will take care of themselves. They won't. It often takes very little effort to make a big difference. It does, however, take courage, and this is where you come in, since others may not step up to the plate.

You can't solve every problem in the world, but living by the above guidelines will make your own corner of the world a more dignified place to be.

You just may end up being the most effective czar of them all.

*Dr. Bruce Weinstein is the public speaker and consultant known as The Ethics Guy. He writes the ethics column for BusinessWeek.com, and his latest book is, "Is It Still Cheating If I Don't Get Caught?" (Macmillan/Roaring Brook Press), which shows teens how to resolve the ethical dilemmas they face. How ethical are ***you***? Take Dr. Weinstein's quiz at TheEthicsGuy.com.*