

## Step forward the ethical mentor

Ethical mentoring is a fairly new term, but it's likely to be one we are going to hear a lot more of. The concept comes from a recognition that unethical and illegal behaviour in organizations rarely happens because an individual or group of people set out to do wrong. Rather, it starts with small breaches and gradually grows in scope and scale. So, for example, a group of employees, who see that they are going to miss an important target, with adverse affects to their bonuses, may be tempted to cheat "just a little bit". The group effect gradually takes over – if "everyone is doing it" or if "my boss knows and turns a blind eye", the misbehaviour is increasingly seen as the norm and therefore acceptable. Most of the illegal behaviours within banks in recent years can be traced to this effect.

Similarly, over-stretched staff in health care may find that the only way to keep up with the paperwork is to cut back on the attention they give to patients. Gradually, patients become seen as a nuisance, because they "take me away from the important work, on which I'm judged". Staff become desensitised to the human impacts of their behaviour – and patient neglect or abuse become a real possibility.

Other factors that make unethical or illegal behaviour more likely include:  
Group loyalty – for example, when health professionals cover up the failings of a colleague, whose incompetence is killing patients. Especially when services are under pressure, group solidarity tends to take precedence over patient care.  
Self-delusion. Most people think they are above averagely ethical. They also think they are above average as a driver. Our need to think well of ourselves leads us to rationalise away behaviours that dent our positive self-image. Recent research indicates, for example, that creative people are more likely to self-delude, because they are better at making up narratives to explain away behaviour that doesn't fit with their espoused values.

Modern mentoring is largely about helping people with the quality of their thinking about issues important to them – in particular to their career and to their personal identity. Ethical mentors focus on helping people think through situations, where they have recognised the potential for conflict of values, or ethical lapses. They also help people develop their ethical awareness, so that they are better able to foresee and avoid ethical dilemmas, and provide a resource, through which business leaders, who are concerned about ethicality, can shape more ethically aware cultures in their organizations.

Ethical mentors also help potential whistle-blowers to consider their actions and the potential consequences. Whistle-blowing processes in large organizations suffer from both reluctance of some people to use them, for fear that matters will escalate out of their control; and conversely from malicious usage, for example by staff who have been justifiably fired, or precipitate use, where the whistle-blower's actions undermine due procedure with regard to an issue already being investigated. The ethical mentor helps people think through when and how to ensure that their concerns are being addressed in an open and appropriate manner, and how to mitigate any negative personal consequences.

Both the finance sector and the National Health Service are currently experimenting with developing ethical mentors. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales is pioneering a customised training programme aimed at experienced finance professionals, who have a strong personal commitment to supporting ethical behaviour in their organizations. I and Celia Moore, Professor of Business Ethics at London Business School designed the Valuing Integrity Programme (VIP) for the ICAEW and we are also working together on a pilot of ethical mentoring for the NHS. Says Jonathan Levy of the ICAEW: “Professional conduct is at the heart of what we stand for. ICAEW research showed that integrity and ethical values are embedded in organizations through ethical leadership, addressing ethical weakness in organizational practices and have a pool of individual who can mentor colleagues to deal with ethical issues. VIP exists to help take forward the values based change programmes already adopted by many organizations so that they have a pool of dedicated individuals who have the ability and motivation to truly embed integrity, ethical behaviour, and openness into the very fabric of day-to-day decision making. “

So who makes a good ethical mentor? All mentoring requires some element of practical experience, so that mentors can contextualise the questions they ask and help clients step back from an issue to see the bigger picture. Ethical mentors don't need to have been involved directly in major ethical dilemmas (though it helps). More important is the reflection they have undertaken around ethical dilemmas that have touched them, or which they have observed. The VIP programme aims to equip them with a deeper understanding of the theory and psychology of ethicality and unethicity, together with practical tools to help clients manage the ethical dimensions of their roles – for example, by equipping them with better tools to predict outcomes of decisions that may have an immediate positive effect on a small group, but a larger negative effect on a wider audience longer term.

Ethical mentors need to have a deep insight into their own thinking processes, in relation to their behaviour and their decision-making. They need strong skills in questioning and challenging – both of themselves and of others. They need to be able to help other people step back and critique their values, judgements and actions – yet the mentor cannot be judgemental themselves. So the outcome of the mentoring conversation is a solution or approach that fits the considered values of the mentee, not those of the mentor.

Ethical mentors need skills in disentangling intent and impact; in extracting appropriate lessons from complex and often highly emotion-soaked situations; and in helping people rediscover their belief in their own potential both to be ethical and to influence their environment (their colleagues, their organization and society) for good.

While they are not expected to substitute for formal processes of whistleblowing, ethical mentors can have a positive impact on the systems that organizations already have in place. Currently, there are two recurring problems with these systems. The first is that people don't report problems, because they are afraid that the situation will escalate out of their control. The second is that, at the other extreme, people rush to report matters to the whistleblowing hotline, and end up undermining due process that is already tackling the problem in an appropriate and effective manner. The ethical mentor provides a practical and trustworthy intermediary, who can help

the would-be whistle-blower work through their options and responsibilities. If they do then decide to go through the formal whistle-blowing process, they can do so with greater confidence that they are doing the right thing.

In addition to working with individuals, the role is expected to encompass being a sounding board for leadership teams. One of the most intractable issues for top teams is how to translate bland statements of values into heart and soul commitment amongst the wider workforce – especially when there is little difference between the values statements of one company and the next. Genuine engagement with shared values can only happen through conversations that allow people to reflect on experience, to build strong connections between their personal values and organizational values, and to explore with others how values work out in practice. In particular, people need frequent conversations that explore how values conflict and practice in how to reconcile values conflicts in ways that are self-honest and less influenced by self-interest than might be the norm.

Some of these conversations can take place within the context of ethical mentoring relationships. Even more powerful, however, is when the leaders are routinely able to have those conversations themselves, using ethical mentors to support them as necessary. Among the critical messages they can disseminate are that:

Ethical problems arise when people close their ears to dissenting opinions. As leaders they can demonstrate that they are open to constructive dissent and value it as a safety check on decisions that might affect corporate reputation. (Another role for ethical mentors may be to assist leaders in seeking out contrary views, from people, who might not otherwise speak up!)

Everyone has lapses in ethical judgement. What counts is not making ethical errors, but recognising, reflecting on and learning from them. If leaders are able to admit their own failings and what they have learned from them, this sets a positive example for the organization as a whole

Like individual people, organizations can have ethical lapses, too. Inappropriate responses are to either try to bury the issue, pretending it didn't happen ("that isn't like us!") or to descend into a frenzy of organizational self-flagellation. An appropriate response is to engage with everyone, who was involved with or touched by the failure, in extracting and applying critical lessons from the experience. The "edict from the top" approach taken by many organizations in the wake of moral failure is rarely effective and typically seen from below as a means of avoiding blame.

Everyone involved in ethical mentoring hopes it will be a pragmatic and effective way of changing the behaviours of leaders and organizations. In the NHS, the first batch of ethical mentors will be staff, who already have some training in the related discipline of coaching. In other organizations, the compliance department is providing the guinea-pigs. But there seems a general consensus that ethical mentors can be drawn from any function and from any level of management. The qualities they have in common are an ability to reflect, a measure of wisdom gained from making difficult choices across their career, and an appreciation of their own frailty and imperfection!