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Honesty in workplace, open communication go hand in hand

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Is the idea of honesty in the workplace an archaic notion?

In today's world of high-profile corporate scandals, many might say it is. But motivational speakers and authors such as Steven Gaffney and Robert Galford want both employees and employers to know that this is not the case. Honesty in the work place is still an obtainable goal: It just takes open communication and trust-building.

When people think about dishonesty in the workplace, they often think of major corporate scandals such as the Enron or Martha Stewart debacles, but honesty issues don't just relate to major corporations and major scandals, says Steven Gaffney, a writer, lecturer and consultant on communications and honesty in the workplace.

Honesty issues have a significant impact on all workplaces, no matter how large or small, Gaffney maintains.

According to Gaffney, true honesty in the workplace does not just mean truth or lies, but equates to simple, straightforward communication.

"Basically, what I determine honesty as, is saying what needs to be said," Gaffney said. "I think most people think they're honest, but the truth is, we all lie: We withhold information."

According to Gaffney, "whenever someone avoids a festering issue with a co-worker, tells a supervisor only the good news, remains silent when they disagree with a proposed initiative, becomes a 'yes-man' with superiors to curry favor, or complains to someone other than the person they have an issue with, they are being dishonest."

Gaffney's newest book, "Honesty Works! — Real-world solutions to solve the most common problems at work and home," is due out next week. In it, Gaffney explores the ideas of what honesty means and why honesty works.

"The No. 1 reason why we lie is not because we're morally flawed, it's because we're afraid," Gaffney said. "People aren't up front because they're afraid."

"Depending on personality styles, people might not feel as comfortable sharing information for fear of criticism or being chastised or somebody getting upset," agreed Patrick Donadio, a business coach and speaker.

"Some personality styles are very dominant and assertive, and if you have that kind of style, you might actually be inhibiting people from sharing information," he said.

"Companies often say they want honesty, but they don't give employees the skills to be honest. They train and condition people to not be honest by the way they react," said Gaffney. In order to foster honesty in the workplace, employers "need to give employees the skills, the tools, to be up front."

Robert Galford, co-author of "The Trusted Advisor" and "The Trusted Leader," said employers and leaders can foster honesty and trust in three ways.

"First is strategic trust — trust in the goals and the strategies of a company," he said. "The second dimension is organizational trust, and that's trust in processes and procedures. The third is individual or personal trust — do we trust the leaders, do we trust the executives?"

In his books, Galford writes about the "enemies of trust." One of these enemies is "when situations are not addressed or recognized," he said, which ties into Gaffney's ideas about the need for honest and open communication in the workplace.

"When people are withholding information, they're also withholding ideas that can help with the growth of an organization," Gaffney said. "Basically, what (I'm) doing is helping people and businesses understand there's a broader meaning to honesty, and that broader meaning (includes) withholding."

"We struggle mostly with ourselves as we debate whether or not to speak up in meetings, confront a co-worker who we have issues with, or approach a supervisor about unreasonable expectations or to clarify instructions," said author Steven Gaffney. "That conflict between what we want to say, and what we actually feel we can say, causes great stress."

Galford agrees. "(Dishonesty) is less about doing bad stuff. It's more about not doing the things that should be done," he said.

"I fundamentally think that the people in the business world are well-intentioned, but I think people sometimes forget their mission, forget their priorities and lose track of the long-term in pursuit of the short-term," Galford said. "The fundamental question is ... is it bad motives or bad judgment?"

Bad judgment and poor communication account for much of the dishonesty in workplaces, according to Gaffney.

"We do a seminar called 'The fish isn't sick, the water is dirty,'" Gaffney said. "The environmental water, the communication water in the workplace gets muddied, and if you give people the tools to clean up the environment, to get the issues resolved, then everything else improves. The No. 1 way to get these issues resolved is to be up front and honest."

The rewards of honest communication in the workplace are not just esoteric. Honesty can actually help reduce work-related stress, according to Gaffney, who said that most of the conflict that occurs in the workplace is internal and has nothing to do with the company itself.

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"The solution," Gaffney added, "is to do what most people are reluctant to do: Be honest. Honesty really does work."

Honesty can work in attracting clients as well, said Galford. In his work as a consultant, "it became very clear ... that the differentiator for clients was not in the quality of the service that firms provided, but much more in the level of trust they had in the individuals and the trusting relationships they had with the people who were advising them," he said.

"There are a lot of banks you can go to for a loan, but there are relatively few bankers who you will trust," Galford said. "There are 'x' number of good rental car companies, supermarkets, lawyers, accountants, but we go to the ones we trust."

Galford will be the keynote speaker at a Dec. 5 workshop and luncheon presented by the Council for Ethics in Economics. The event takes place at the Confluence Park Restaurant in Columbus. To register or obtain more information, visit www.businessethics.org or contact Lisa Mueller at (614) 221-8661.