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The Future of Corporate Ethics: U.S. Poll Reveals Teens' Decision Making Is Ethically-Challenged

The results of the fifth annual Junior Achievement/Deloitte Teen Ethics Survey, which polled teens across the United States on their opinions regarding their ability to make ethical decisions, has revealed a rather bleak reality. Seventy-one percent (71%) of the teens surveyed stated that they felt they were prepared to make ethical decisions when they enter the workforce. However, thirty-eight percent (38%) of this group indicated that they believe cheating, plagiarizing, lying and even in some cases, committing acts of violence is acceptable in order to achieve success. Regarding violence, twenty-seven percent (27%) of these teens felt that violence would be justified in order to settle an argument and twenty percent (20%) felt that violence in the name of revenge was acceptable.

The key motivation behind these teens' ability to rationalize this unethical and, in some cases, illegal behavior appears to be an intense pressure to succeed. In fact, fifty-one (51%) percent of teens surveyed expressed an "overwhelming" pressure to succeed. So it is no wonder that teens express little confidence in the ethical convictions of their peers, rating teenagers second to last among groups listed in the survey including police officers, teachers, professional athletes and lawyers. The lowest rated group following teens, according to this survey, was politicians. The implication is that the pressure to succeed leads to lower ethical standards for behavior among the majority of teens.

The survey further reported that teens have difficulty understanding that the consequences of unethical behavior transcend the boundaries between what they do in their private lives, at school, at work and even online. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of all teens surveyed said that it is unfair for an employer to fire or suspend an employee for unethical behavior outside of the workplace. This generation is the first to have grown up in a "wired" world and the anonymity it provides. Therefore, they more readily rationalize illegally downloading music, nearly half of the teens (47%) said that it was acceptable, while only five percent (5%) found stealing from a store acceptable. These results indicate that teens apply their own unique code of ethics to each situation they encounter, which allows them to shift the boundaries of right and wrong for their own gain. Regarding the results of this poll, the president and CEO of JA Worldwide (Junior Achievement), Gerald M. Czarnecki says, "As the teens of today become the workforce of tomorrow, it is more important than ever that they learn how to make appropriate, ethical decisions. Our society relies on its members having a clear understanding that integrity and trust are the foundation of all human relationships."

I agree with Mr. Czarnecki's characterization of the importance of ethics for our future. Today, there is significantly less ethical or moral education. Most educators are appropriately concerned about offending a student or colleague with teaching a protocol for right and wrong or good and bad. Issues of religion, spirituality, and morality complicate our ability to agree to an ethical framework. As such, we frequently decide to avoid teaching ethics so as to avoid the controversy, which has allowed an

educational apathy to ensue. The combined impact of apathy and anonymity has created a situational approach to ethics.

As a university professor, I have witnessed this situational approach to ethics among my students and their peers all too often. The recent scandal involving members of the Florida State Seminoles football team and accusations of cheating on a test administered online indicates, as the JA survey does, that students struggle with applying traditional ethics in the anonymous world that exists online, even in a controlled university setting. I firmly believe that in spite of this self-serving situational approach to ethics, most teens have in them, as do most people, a moral compass. They have simply not been taught how to tap into that compass to make ethical decisions.

In my experience working with business executives and not-for-profit leaders, I have found that people who consistently prioritize the best interests of others over their own are the happiest and quite often most successful people. These successful individuals are always acting in someone else's best interest. All of these people seem to have one thing in common; they conduct their daily lives like a fiduciary. The fiduciary skill set is not based on instinct for the most part, it must be taught. The imperative here, and my personal calling in life, is giving people the tools they need to succeed at their goals while upholding the ethical principles that apply to all people...to "do no harm."

As both a practicing attorney for over 16 years and an Assistant Instructional Professor for the University of Houston School of Communications, Michael Tate Barkley has become a highly regarded expert in the development of ethical corporate cultures and effective communications. Barkley's first book, Successful Ethical Decision Making: Get What You Want Without Getting In Trouble, written with Dr. John Henry Glover, will be published in November 2007. For more information about Michael Tate Barkley and his company Critical Communications, LLC visit his website at www.criticalcommunications.org.