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Building trust through ethical culture – a guide for SME firms

Getting your staff involved



Introduction

Your staff are at the heart of your firm's ethical culture. They both feed into it and in turn are guided by it. To understand and develop that ethical culture, you need to be sure to involve the people at your firm.

There are two elements to this. On the one hand, you need to listen to your staff in order to learn something about your firm's ethical culture, and on the other hand, you need to talk with them about how you want to develop that culture. It's a symbiotic engagement: both you and your staff are interacting and learning as they go.

If you were tempted to think that involving your staff in plans to change your firm's ethical culture sounds too complex, too vague, too difficult, then be warned. The likelihood of those plans succeeding without the involvement of staff would be small. That's why the business phrase "culture beats strategy, every time" has stayed around.

Remember also that there is one management skill more than any other that helps your firm's plans for ethics succeed, and that is 'listening'. Listening is the most ethical of all skills, and in using it, it is invariably reciprocated: your staff will listen more to you. In this way, you move your staff from being an audience, to being engaged in your plans, and that is a step vital to the success of those plans.

This guide outlines 12 steps that you can use to get your staff involved in your plans for your firm's ethical culture. Practise them and the chances of your plans for the firm's ethical culture succeeding will grow.



12 steps to involving staff in your plans for ethics

1. Start with getting the context right. Whatever you are planning as first steps, remember that you're not starting from scratch. Your ethical culture already exists and you need to take that into account. You may have a plan of where you want to get to in terms of the firm's ethical culture, but you need to start involving your staff around where your ethical culture is now.
2. Be clear about what you're expecting from staff when you first engage them about the firm's ethical culture. Don't start with a list of expectations: instead, share your hopes of what you want to achieve by thinking about 'how things get done round here'. Ask them for their hopes as well, and listen to what they say, for out of those two views will emerge the shape of the outcomes that can be achieved.
3. Be clear as well about the nature of their ongoing involvement. Is this a one-off exchange of ideas and thoughts, after which they hear little, or is it your expectation that their involvement will be an active and ongoing one?
4. Be prepared to listen to some bad news as well as good news. If you want your staff to be open with you, you should be open to both the ups and the downs. Every ethical culture has hurdles it needs to deal with and an open atmosphere helps bring them out.
5. If there's reticence to be fully open at this stage, show them a good example. Share some personal reasons why doing this is important to you. And then use the 'call a spade a spade' approach. Raise problems that you think these plans for the firm's ethical culture might encounter. If you suspect there's 'an elephant in the room', point it out.
6. Remember to share the 'why we are doing this' with them, as well as the 'what we are thinking of doing' with them. And encourage your staff to come up with their own ideas in relation to those 'why' aspects of your plan.
7. Don't be too 'top down' in your style. There does need to be some 'tone from the top', but in small firms, this is really only needed to the extent that it confirms commitment.
8. Don't have any topics that can't be included in the discussions. If your staff see remuneration or discipline as influencing 'how things get done round here', then be prepared to listen to that feedback.
9. One approach to encourage continuing openness from your staff is to give them an ethical dilemma to discuss. This could be fictional, but with relevance to the work of the firm. Make sure it's built around realistic characters with relevant concerns and a meaningful dilemma at its heart. Encouraging people to discuss indirect problems like this can help them take that step towards discussing direct problems that are influencing what happens in the firm.



12 steps to involving staff in your plans for ethics

10. Aim for agreement to tackle some 'quick wins'. It's better to achieve small, simple and quick advances that change something, as that builds confidence to then take more challenging. There's a delicate balancing act to follow here. On the one hand, the impression shouldn't be given that those bigger challenges are being ignored. On the other hand, bigger challenges are often well engrained and may need to be addressed in stages, rather than in one, big overall leap.
11. Keep accountability for making things happen, but encourage someone else to take responsibility for facilitating change. Again, there's a delicate balancing act here. On the one hand, you don't want to allow ethics to be seen as just a 'director-led' thing. On the other hand, you don't want to appear to abrogate responsibility. Remember that the changes being sought are likely to involve a number of people, as opposed to any one single individual. This team dimension introduces wider responsibilities for changing things and so the role you're giving someone is much more in terms of facilitation. What you then do is keep in relatively close touch with that 'facilitator', listening to progress and lending your visible support to the steps being taken.
12. Promise and then deliver feedback. Tell staff what you think has changed as a result of those steps, and how their involvement influenced that. And remember to listen to their feedback on those steps. Were they worthwhile? What is different as a result? What might be addressed next?

These 12 steps are not rocket science, but they can sometimes be difficult to bring out in a small, personal and hard working environment. Practise them and the chances of your plans for the firm's ethical culture succeeding will grow.



The Chartered Insurance Institute
42-48 High Road, South Woodford,
London E18 2JP

tel: +44 (0)20 8989 8464

customer.serv@cii.co.uk
cii.co.uk

 Chartered Insurance Institute

 @CIIGroup

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