Future of Ethics Training: Trends

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To build on the gains made in recent years, ethics training will have to accomplish several goals. First, ethics training needs to focus on unleashing participants’ intrinsic motivation to be ethical, rather than rely on solely on a compliance mentality that justifies ethical behavior through rewards and punishment. When people are intrinsically motivated they persevere through difficult times and are less likely to take short cuts. By making ethics something that leaders want to do and need to do in order to succeed, we can increase commitment to ethics in organizations and reduce the likelihood of ethical lapses which can be more likely to occur if our field of vision is narrowed by external incentives.

Second, today’s decision makers need to build skills in two main areas of ethics. The first is to build habit of speaking up when they know what is right. This means having the courage to act in ways they know they should even in the face of difficult conversations and risking social harmony. This kind of moral courage can be fostered through practice, support, and coaching. Additionally, today’s leaders need to practice making sense of complex moral issues, where the right thing to do is not clear. In these situations we can easily fall back on assumptions and habits that can be counterproductive in novel situations. Making sense of complex moral issues means understanding different perspectives and being able to create new options that minimize harm on others and create benefits for a broad group of stakeholders.

Finally, ethics training should enable participants to be better stewards of an ethical culture, this means going beyond addressing their own moral dilemmas to helping others make good choices. Building skills like active listening, exercising empathy, giving constructive criticism, and testing assumptions are useful in furthering dialogue about ethical issues and supporting colleagues in making better choices.

Ethics training is an important part of building and sustaining a culture of excellence. If we can unleash intrinsic motivation to be ethical and build skills around courage, sense making, and dialogue ethics training can help build a better future for organizations.

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Francesca Gino is a professor of business administration in the Negotiation, Organizations & Markets Unit at Harvard Business School. She is also formally affiliated with the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School and with the Mind, Brain, Behavior Initiative at Harvard.

She teaches Decision Making and Negotiation in the MBA elective curriculum and in Executive Education programs at the School. She also co-teaches a PhD course on Behavioral Approaches to Decision Making and a PhD course on Experimental Methods.

Her research focuses on judgment and decision-making, negotiation, ethics, motivation, productivity, and creativity. Her work has been published in academic journals in both psychology and management including the Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly, Cognition, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Management Science, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Organization Science, Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, Strategic Management Journal, and Psychological Science, as well as in numerous book chapters and practitioner outlets. In addition to teaching, she advises firms and not-for-profit organizations in the areas of negotiation, decision-making, and organizational behavior.

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Dr. Lee specializes in the field of Organizational Behavior, and Behavioral Decision Science. The overarching theme of her research is to deepen our understanding of stress and dishonesty, and to find ways in which individuals and organizations can overcome such barriers to organizational performance. She integrates empirical observations from lab and field experiments, and devises interventions for promoting productive, healthy, and honest behavior in organizations. She received a PhD and an MPP from Harvard Kennedy School, and a BA in Political Science from Korea University. 

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