Ethics training is a tough nut to crack. The content is extremely important, but it’s difficult to communicate it in a way that actually engages employees. So, what to do? How can you get your employees to care?

Georgia-Pacific, one of the world’s leading manufacturers and marketers of tissue, packaging, paper, cellulose and related chemicals, has found a way to shake things up with their Ethics in Action program.

Borrowing the concept from sister company, Georgia-Pacific launched their Ethics in Action (EIA) program in 2011 as a means to engage their 35,000+ employees. The objective of the program is to use scenario-based, leader-facilitated discussions to reinforce key compliance concepts. At last count, EIA contained 85 scenarios for use in the program, with content ranging from current compliance news to risky business activities to real Georgia-Pacific examples of compliance failures and successes.

The leaders in these discussions are key to its core goal: they must be able to present the material effectively, engage participants, and communicate key objectives while still maintaining flexibility.

The EIA program works by putting an average of 8-10 employees in a group conversation setting. A discussion leader presents the scenario at hand, and the group works through questions that tie back to the Code of Conduct or relevant compliance standard. The process emphasizes participation—members discuss the situation, work through the questions, and then talk through several what-if scenarios. The conversation ends with the leader giving key take-aways and directing the participants to additional resources.

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Carol Murin, vice president of Compliance
Have high standards for your leaders
The people who lead your trainings are crucial to the success of the program. Look for leaders who have demonstrated ease in facilitating conversations, people who make their presentations interesting and engaging, and people who elicit respect from their audience.

Create a neutral environment for managers and employees
As noted by King, one of the best results of the EIA sessions has been the opportunity for managers and employees to relate about ethics in a neutral setting. Create a space for employees on all levels of management to talk about these important issues and form a mutual understanding of your company’s values.

Encourage participation
The success of Georgia-Pacific’s EIA program rests on the engagement of their employees. Avoid trainings that feature dry PowerPoint slides or a single speaker presenting a bulk of material. Instead, operate in small groups, have discussion questions, and foster participation.

Lean into complexity
The power of EIA is that it manages to take the Code of Conduct and make it relevant and meaningful in the everyday thinking of employees. It does this by talking about the compliance standards in relation to real issues at Georgia-Pacific and beyond. The program deals with compliance successes and failures, talking about how people make mistakes, how people can ameliorate mistakes, and how people can do the right thing. By operating in real scenarios, the EIA program better ensures that lessons will be impactful, and perhaps more importantly, memorable.

“We want the leaders to be of the highest quality, to be able to keep their audience engaged and gain their respect.”