In March, we brought together 40 corporate leaders and a few hand-picked scholars for an intimate, practical discussion about “breakthrough behaviors”—ways that successful organizations have generated ethical leadership from unexpected angles.

The concept behind our fourth annual forum was that institutional habits and goals can naturally align an organization, allowing it to flourish not only ethically, but also across the enterprise. We framed the discussion around three areas: process, purpose, and people. Experts from varied industries kicked off each topic with their insights. Among them were Google’s Mary Kate Stimmeler, a people analytics expert; Jim Quigley, CEO emeritus of Deloitte; General Denny Reimer, retired Army Chief of Staff; Giving Voice to Values founder, Mary Gentile; Keith Darcy, one of the godfathers of the ethics and compliance field; and Perry Minnis, who headed up ethics at Alcoa during Paul O’Neill’s legendary focus on safety.

Our goal was to offer the participants a space in which they could create personalized, concrete takeaways based on the ideas exchanged throughout the event. We wanted them to look inside their own organizations, apply what they heard, and use it when they got back to their desks. One way we encouraged this was by emphasizing stories, since our brains best remember things that are shared socially—the emotional and relational. The group recounted anecdotes and described exemplars from their own organizations, identifying common threads between and building upon one another’s experiences.

Here’s a sampling of ideas and action items that emerged from the presentations, group discussions, and informal conversations throughout Deloitte University’s campus.
When communicating values and ethics to employees, acknowledge the reality of their context, come to them from a place of respect for their values, and then create thought experiments. Talk about hypothetical situations, ask them what they would do when confronted with an ethical decision in a certain set of circumstances. By freeing them from the constraints of their immediate realities, you’re giving them the space to be creative. You tap into their aspirations.

Raising issues with peers when you’re a senior leader is tricky—maintaining congenial relationships and balancing egos can leave you knowing what you need to do, but not how to do it. It’s worth thinking about as an executive team and setting norms for those conversations.

Learn how to listen for employees voicing their values to you. Acknowledge that the conversation will be difficult. Show gratitude for their courage, and make action plans to take what they say into account.

Emphasize team impact over individual performance. By framing success as a team pursuit, you foster group accountability and safeguard against exceptionalism and siloing, two fertile grounds for ethical breaches.

As a manager approaching employee feedback and leadership, ask the question, “What do you need from me to succeed?” Looking at the other side of the equation, make sure your employees believe that their feedback will make a difference. If you can gain your employees’ trust that what they say will matter, odds are they will be more honest, more thoughtful, and ultimately more engaged.

Frame your company values as participatory. You’ll create a sense of team accountability that promotes agency and ultimately unifies the entire enterprise.

Adopt the Aristotelian idea of flourishing when approaching ethics and compliance. Instead of focusing on avoiding bad behavior in employees, complement compliance by encouraging them to be their best selves.

Beware of malicious compliance, or people giving you exactly what you ask for and nothing more. Rather than being rules-focused, be more inclusive—help the people who live the values shape the rules.

A culture of ethical behavior must be led by people committed to ethical principles for their own sake. It can’t be solely about avoiding a lawsuit or the money you make by having a good reputation.

Resist the temptation to create new vision with each new leader. Build on what was great about the former program rather than changing course and starting from scratch.

The Latin root of the word profession shows that it comes from the idea of “committing to something bigger than oneself.” When we ask people what their profession is, do we ever say, “What are you committed to that’s bigger than yourself?” Recognize the obligations associated with being a professional.

“Ask yourself: What does it mean to have your company’s name on your business card? What does it mean to be part of this organization? What are your obligations as a member of this team? Compliance can then be linked to a sense of belonging and representation rather than rule-following.”
There are two kinds of memory: semantic memory, or things you’ve memorized, and episodic memory, the experiences that have taught you to make sense of your environment. When you’re making an ethical decision, you’re not drawing on your semantic memory of values statements or learned codes. You’re pattern-matching. So reconsider how you’re teaching people ethics, and recognize the importance of experiences over learned knowledge.

Leverage the power of storytelling. There are bound to be company legends and exemplars, stories told on the elevator or during company lunches. Harness these stories, crafting them and articulating them to showcase the crucial values of the company. They are teachable moments that reinforce what your organization is all about.

Feedback shapes behavior best if it is both timely and accurate. This way, it can be used to develop habits and intuitions into how to deal with ethical questions. Critically analyze your feedback system and make sure it meets both criteria—you’ll be doing your organization a huge favor.

Retire the strategy of thinking your way into a new way of acting. Instead, focus on acting your way into a different way of thinking. Don’t start by trying to grasp or teach higher-order concepts of integrity and honor. Concrete action around your values can be much more impactful than mental frameworks and semantic lessons.

Don’t just put your values in writing on posters and business cards. Take a page from one CEO’s book and don’t write them down at all. Instead, tie each value to a story that came out of your organization of when someone exemplified it best.

When you want to change a behavior in your company, tap into a set of habits employees already have and translate it to your new goal. One legal firm, for example, improved its internal operations by appealing to its attorneys’ skill of client care, adopting the maxim: “We treat our colleagues in our firm the same way we treat our best client.”

Have senior leaders talk about ethical dilemmas they faced, but not in a way that makes them heroes. Encourage them to share their thought processes during the decision: why was the choice difficult; what were the feared consequences; were they tempted to make a choice they knew would be wrong?

By giving employees the process of making an ethical decision from the perspective of a leader, you create a cultural context in your organization where difficult issues are more easily discussed.

Understand the power of a learning experience versus a training experience. We can be so focused on evaluations and performance reviews that we starve our employees of true learning opportunities, spaces where they can develop without the threat of consequences.

Pay attention to growth mindsets—look for openness to feedback and feedback-seeking. You want high-potential leaders to be hungry for feedback, to have an appetite for growth. (And hey, you might want to seek it yourself!)

Feedback sessions can be awkward. Try to combat this mood and make feedback normal. Treat it like a conversation, make it systematic, give it a regular rhythm, like clockwork. By creating these habits of feedback, you normalize the process, making it a richer experience for both employees and managers.

Script difficult conversations. Having something tangible around which to organize talking points gives you structure and steadies the interaction.

Create an expectation with your employees that your communications are going to be valuable. Make them believe that it’s going to be insightful, thoughtful, and interactive.

Be brief, and put power in your words.

Ask people you train how they define success at the end of the training rather than deciding for them what effective training should be. Why not start with, “How would you consider this to be a useful? You’re giving up time that you could be doing something else, how would this be useful to you at the end?”

Build an ability to make the complex simple. Achieve that level of clarity required so each communication can be short and direct. This will take immense effort at times, but the salience of the final product will greatly increase the odds of your employees grasping and acting on the information.

"It’s amazing what you can accomplish in 12 hours.”

Notes
Our forum bore fruit. These items are a buffet of sorts—tidbits arising not only from planned remarks from speakers and selected experts—but also from the conversations that naturally arose throughout the event, often between two previous strangers from different industries. How could they resonate in your organization? What impact could you make? What relationships and resources could you leverage? Where will you go to start the process?

We’re here to help. We strive to offer content that is forward-looking, pragmatic, and provocative in the hope that our efforts will help you to better your organizations, and ultimately use yourselves, to make business a force for good.

Check out our resources here: @NDDCEL ethicalleadership.nd.edu