2024-25 Middle Level Topics

Exploring Business Ethics

Honesty & Integrity in the Workplace – Why it Matters

Background Info

In 2022, FTX, one of the biggest cryptocurrency exchanges in the world, declared bankruptcy after extensive financial mismanagement and dishonesty were discovered throughout the company. FTX had been hiding billions of dollars in liabilities from the public and allowed sister companies to borrow nearly unlimited funds in customer deposits. FTX's customers lost billions, and the worldwide crypto market collapsed.

At the center of what became one of the biggest financial scandals in American history was the young, talented inner circle of FTX executives who went from rising stars to fraudsters. FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried—who was 30 years old at the time of the scandal and once dubbed the "crypto king"— was sentenced to 25 years in prison. FTX's former chief executive officer (age 28), chief technology officer (29), and director of engineering (27) all pleaded guilty to fraud as well.

As extreme as they were, the actions of these prodigious professionals present a learning opportunity for younger generations entering the workforce. Young professionals need more than just technical skills in the workplace. They need a strong ethical framework to help them distinguish right from wrong and make difficult decisions. Without it, they run the risk of making the same mistakes as the once-promising leadership at FTX. Not every employee can defraud millions like them, but any employee can demonstrate dishonesty, greed, or a lack of integrity if they don't uphold their own ethical principles.

But what are ethics? Ethics are the basic principles that govern your behavior. Although people often have different views on what ethics exactly means, following ethical principles means one's ethical beliefs remain unchanged no matter the circumstances, including—and especially—in professional settings like the workplace. Ethical principles can guide any employee through dilemmas with coworkers, superiors, and customers. Examples of ethical principles include honesty and integrity (adhering to a set of personal ethics).

And the need for greater integrity in the workplace has never been more relevant. According to a 2024 study from ethics education firm LRN, Gen Z employees are 2.5 times more likely than any other generation to agree that it's OK to break the rules to get the job done. In addition, 22% of Gen Zers admit to violating their company's code of conduct in the past year, a far higher number than Millennials, Gen Xers, or Baby Boomers.

What explains these statistics? Do Gen Zers inherently struggle to be as ethical as previous generations? Or does Gen Z's ethical culture simply differ from those of their predecessors? Whether the answer is one or the other—or both—does not change the underlying need for young professionals to develop a strong understanding of ethics in the workplace.

This development does not begin the first day on the job; it starts years before, in the classroom and at home. Every day, young adults encounter many situations in which they can demonstrate ethical principles such as integrity and honesty. They may not realize it in the moment, but these everyday actions can have a profound impact on their life and future.

Middle School Scenario

Valerie works for Longcloth Avenue—a small, high-end clothing store—as a marketing specialist. Valerie's boss has asked her to take on a special assignment: developing the customer testimonials section of the company's annual report. This section will showcase how the company is loved by its customers. It is an important assignment, especially because this is Valerie's first job out of college, so her manager gives her three weeks to complete her section of the report.

However, the weeks go by, and Valerie still hasn't started the report. She has been busy with other projects. Plus, she always started her school projects at the last minute and got good grades, so she figures this work will be similar.

But then Valerie realizes the report's deadline is only a few days away. To make matters worse, her manager wants to check in with her today to discuss her progress on the report section.

Valerie must now decide what to do next. One option is to tell her manager that the report is going well and will be submitted on time. This means Valerie will need to rush and likely submit a report that isn't very good.

The other option is to admit that she procrastinated on her assignment. In response, her manager would likely ask others in the department to help, which will throw off their schedules and disrupt other work. Plus, this course of action would damage the trust between them.

What do you think Valerie should do?

Suggested Questions to Cover During the Event
- What is the ethical issue in this scenario?
- Who are the people that might be impacted by Valerie's actions?
- Should Valerie hide her procrastination, admit her mistake, or do something else entirely? Why?
- How might Valerie's opportunities at the company be impacted by her actions in this scenario?
- Would this scenario be different if Valerie had not been working on other projects? Why or why not?

Exploring Business Issues

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is quickly changing jobs. Professionals are wondering how this new technology will affect their careers. Include answers to the following questions during your presentation:
- Which industries are likely to see the biggest changes?
- What should business leaders be doing to welcome the benefits of AI tools for their workers?
- What actions can be taken to prevent the potential harms of AI in the workplace?

Exploring Public Speaking

Choose skills that are developed when participating in community service or volunteer experiences and explain why these skills matter.

Exploring Website Design

Develop a website to showcase various clubs and organizations at your school, including their activities, achievements, and membership information. The website should include the following:
- Home page & navigation menu
- Club/Organization Directory: A page listing all school clubs and organizations. Each club/organizations should be presented as a "product card" that includes an image, club/organization name, and a brief description
- Event Highlights: A section showcasing past and upcoming club/organization events
- Join us: A page with information on how to join each club/organization

Feel free to include any other elements to enhance the website.

Note: Website does not have to be live. If working directly with your school, permission must be received from the school to make the website public.

Video Game Challenge

Develop a game that introduces players to business etiquette in different cultures.
The game must:
- Be playable on PC, Mac, or tablet
- Incorporate accurate facts about business etiquette in different cultures
- Use keyboard, mouse, or touch input
- Include scoring, win/lose conditions, and at least two levels