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Ethics in mature organizations

The ethical culture of companies increasingly often ceases to be a Corporate Social Responsibility issue and thus enters the domain of daily business. For a number of years, large companies, including in particular international corporations, have been acting with a view to improving the standards and patterns of behaviour which are consistent with the company philosophy and generally considered worth following.

The relevance of the value system in enterprises

Discussions of patterns of behaviour and of ethics will always refer to human attitudes since, despite the development of digitization and robotization, employees are still considered each company's greatest "asset". Therefore, many enterprises with an established market position make an organizational and financial effort to make the employees and the environment of the company aware of the values whose observance is significant from their perspective. A value system is treated as a prerequisite for building the company image. An increasing number of companies are also aware that the company image which took so much effort to build may be damaged by a single deed of an employee, even if it was not directly work-related. Hence the growing significance attached by enterprises to their employees adhering to high ethical standards in their private lives as well as professional ones, if it may affect the employer's reputation in any manner.

Apart from purely business motivations, ethical standards very often also have their sources in the philosophy of the company, which dates back to the beginnings of its activity

or was elaborated by the owner. For instance, in 1965 the founder of VELUX formulated the definition of a Model Company "...working with products useful to society, which treats its customers, suppliers, employees of all categories and shareholders better than most other companies". This philosophy, developed creatively and cherished for a number of years, evolved into an entire system of activities with a view to creating the highest standards in all areas of the company's activity.

From recruitment to leaving the company

Ethics are intrinsically connected with human activity, hence almost all of the attention should be devoted to the people who create the company's culture and its image. The key to ethical standards firmly instilled in the employees is creating a strong, long-term bond and mutual loyalty – of the employee towards the company, but also of the company towards the employee. A mature organization strives to ensure that every employee, as well as potential employee, at every stage of their contacts with the company, feels that ethical values are important to the company, respected and binding for everyone

Creating high ethical standards for the organization and its employees requires much effort and involvement of people as well as of funds. The latter sometimes become an argument in favour of restricting activities promoting business ethics to the bare minimum. The management of mature organizations, which aspire to being perceived as adhering to the highest standards, should regard such costs as a good investment in building the company's long-term market position. Experience shows that systematic work with people and daily, practical application of ethical principles in business bring tangible results very quickly.

who joins the organization. Therefore, building respect and attachment to high ethical standards should be reflected in the employer-employee relationship from the early stages of recruitment up to the moment of employee leaving the company. It is up to the employer to set, by its actions and behaviour, the examples which it expects its employees to follow. Only a company which acts in an ethical, fair and loyal manner with regard to its employees can expect a similar attitude on their part. Writing down codes of ethics or introducing various catalogues of positive behaviours is a waste of energy if the employer does not impose the highest standards upon itself and fails to treat its employees with respect.

a) Model recruitment

It is important for the future employee to be certain from the recruitment stage that the company they apply for a position in ensures the respect of the highest ethical standards. All recruitment processes must be conducted with full professionalism, mutual respect and open, friendly communication. The recruitment process is getting to know one another and matching mutual expectations and capabilities. Therefore, clearly communicating the mutual expectations and the possibilities of their fulfilment is vital. The employee should not be disappointed by what they find at the company when they come to work there. Failure to keep promises has adverse effects on the employer's relationship with the employee and hence on the latter's attitude towards the company. It is good practice to write down the issues established during the job interview in the form of a letter of intent, which will then constitute the basis for the final agreement. It also allows to avoid misunderstandings. Both the employer and the employee should always follow the rule: "Never promise more than you can do, but try to do more than you promised". The employee will only adhere to this principle if they can count on being treated the same way themselves.

The popularity of internal recruitment and of candidate recommendation is growing. Apart from a number of substantive advantages, internal recruitment also has a very positive effect on the team's morale. Elaborating transparent principles for recruitment and introducing the rule that jobs are first offered to persons within the company give the employees a sign that they are a part of the team which they can shape, as well as an opportunity to cooperate with people they know, they trust and, importantly – they can vouch for. This mechanism leads to an increase in the number of people who mind not only their own work ethics, but also those of the colleagues they previously recommended.

The old Polish saying, "Do not do unto others what you would not want done to yourself", also applies to business. For a number of years, VELUX has followed the principle not to employ persons working for its competitors. In many sectors, it is a significant sacrifice, but one which can pay off. A company which aspires to leadership in the field of ethical standards should provide its environment with a clear signal that it does not "cut corners" and it treats its competitors as it would like to be treated itself. Owing to this principle, our employees are also aware that no actions bearing any signs of unfair competition will be tolerated. We can also count on the fact that, after a few years of functioning in such culture, they will at least think twice before making the decision on accepting a job with the competition.

b) Introduction to work – instilling the company values

The stage of the employee's introduction to work is a very significant moment in building an appropriate relationship between the employer and the employee. A mature organization must duly prepare and conduct this process. During the first weeks of employment, the employee becomes

acquainted with the company and forms their opinion on it. Obviously, the process works both ways – the company also gets to know the new employee and to evaluate whether the selected candidate meets the expectations.

The introduction of the candidate should involve not only the substantive preparation to work at a given position, but also elements of presentation of the company's philosophy and values. It is very important for the employee to understand that they are expected not only to fulfil the strictly business objectives, but also to respect specific principles and methods of work. A modern, developed organization asks its employees not only whether the objectives were achieved, but also – how. At the introduction stage, it needs to be communicated clearly and repeatedly that the performance of tasks without respect for the ethical values and the corporate principles will not be accepted. However, the employee must also feel that a certain margin of error tolerance exists. Permitting mistakes is vital for ensuring the employee's sincerity and openness. Such principles must be clearly communicated to the employee and should be discussed in detail at the introduction stage. It will help instil, from the very beginning, a conviction that ethics are a practical issue, to be applied every day.

Prior to formally taking up work, the employee should not be provided with any company documents. First and foremost, it is related to ensuring the security of data covered by company secrecy. On the other hand, a person who is not yet at work should not be encumbered with any tasks, even if they consist in simply reading materials. It will be an expression of respect for their private time and plans, and the introduction calendar scheduled in advance will enable them to start the exercise of their new obligations smoothly. In case of mature organizations which apply social responsibility principles, it is such minor actions that ensure the establishment of high standards in building relationships with the employee, which in turn result in a high level of their attachment to company values.

A mature organization provides the employees with a feeling of security at work, in a broad sense. The employer should ensure the appropriate comfort of work, which involves providing the relevant knowledge regarding the applicable principles, procedures and processes. Clearly defined criteria and accountability are important, but the awareness of consequences of the actions taken has even more relevance. A manager making significant decisions for the company must have the feeling of personal security and be aware of the company's trust. An organization which "punishes" the employees too strictly

for their mistakes is at a risk of concealing problems and failing to communicate difficult situations.

c) Everyday work and values

Many companies elaborate various catalogues of good practice or examples to be followed. However, even the best ethical standards and codes will remain a dead letter if they are not "nurtured" daily by the employer. A mature organization ensures that the formulated principles become a permanent element of the company's operation. New projects and initiatives should always be consistent with such principles. The employees should know which principles are applied how, and within what scope. It is also up to the employer to enforce that the employees suggesting actions justify them adhering to specific principles applicable at the company and referring to such principles. This will allow the team to feel very quickly that such rules are important, genuine and applicable in practice. The foregoing may be complemented by a prize program for the employees showing particular involvement in the implementation of the company's ethical values.

A mature organization should also take note of extraordinary situations in the lives of its employees and offer them support at difficult times. The scope of assistance should be established individually by each company. However, the employees should perceive their employer as a partner, also at difficult moments.

d) Parting ways with the employee

Each company which employed at least one person will need to let them go sooner or later. Reasons may vary – change of jobs, retirement, employment restructuring, dismissal or death of the employee. An employer who sets the highest ethical standards must ensure that each parting of ways is conducted in a professional manner, respectfully of the departing employee. It is extremely important from the point of view of respect for the person leaving the company, but perhaps even more important for building the relationship with the persons who remain.

Each of them is aware that they will also leave the company one day and that they may be treated in a similar manner. The general terms of departure must be specified and established in an agreement concluded by the parties. The basic ones derive from the applicable provisions of law. It is worth ensuring that the key employees may count on more favourable conditions than those imposed by legal regulations. Remember, even former employees may make excellent company ambassadors if they are treated the right way.