



Are Women Really the Fairer Sex?

Gender and Ethics at Work

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Do women think and behave differently than men when making ethical decisions? America's roster of those indicted for corporate fraud contains mostly men, but men have historically been in the majority as top executives. That reality is changing. Although the number of women holding top executive positions is still woefully small, the number of women in professional and managerial roles has more than doubled (to approximately 21 million) during the

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— Darnell Lattal



past two decades. Are we really the exemplars of good decisions and good deeds that we believe we are when we occupy leadership positions?

The truth is that women aren't moral or ethical simply because they were born female. Carol Gilligan, an internationally acclaimed psychologist, asserts that women do operate with a unique ethical perspective because of cultural conditioning. She states that men are more concerned with issues of rules and justice, while women focus more on caring relationships and are less likely to judge others. Such caring concern does not in itself lead to more ethical (wise) decisions. The practice of ethics takes a lifetime of learning and we are only as good at it as our history indicates. Every day is like Groundhog Day as depicted in the movie: Those striving to be ethical start over every day, hoping to do it right, in a never-ending journey. As more women enter executive positions, they too must make decisions that demand ethical consideration at the same level of visibility as their male colleagues.

We need to surround ourselves with people who are committed to supporting ethical actions. Such people need to be wise, not self-satisfied. They need not be people who

assume they are especially ethical and thus in a position to "help others" but rather they realize that we all might at some time or place be tempted and, in fact, make a wrong choice. They should be people who are alert to how easy it is to make a small mistake that can take on a life of its own and who are adept at identifying the unintended consequences of actions. If we are fortunate, we will have such people who tell us about their concerns directly and without apology.

In my 25 years as a management consultant, I've discovered that both genders share some common misconceptions about how to activate ethics in the workplace. Please understand that whether a decision is ethical or not is not defined by expressed beliefs or a values statement, but by behavior—what is actually said and done—and its impact on others. As more women fill power positions, they shouldn't delude themselves that they are invincible on the ethical front, but rather prepare to maintain an ethical perspective backed by actions once in the midst of corporate demands. The science of behavior can help us understand our individual history of choices and to understand how



“good people,” even ourselves, can do the wrong thing. Remember, it is doubtful that anyone who climbed the corporate ladder at Enron wanted to have jailbird on their impressive resumes. One slips down an ethical slope one small step at a time. Understanding the laws of behavior can make it less likely that we will slip. Here are a few practical steps to help you maintain your balance:

STEP 1: LEARN ABOUT BEHAVIOR

Claims about the existence of women’s intuition may be based in part on our role in society to keenly observe the behavior of others. Of course, we all know we are not equally good at this just because we are women but, as a group, we look at people. We listen to how they speak, how they approach us, and how they interact. This may give us a bit of an edge in understanding others; but the feeling that we are good at reading styles and personalities can lead us to make false assumptions about how we use that information—not always for the good. At times, women can and do label people unfairly. We can overestimate

the character of a person and assume that character alone accounts for ethical actions. We can underestimate what is needed to sustain ethical actions throughout a corporation even when the right people are hired.

When we learn to examine ourselves and others with clarity and impartiality, we gain the power to bring about change. For example, if you think that a person is devious, break that label down into the specific behaviors that shape your perception (habitual lateness in responding to requests, saying something happened when it did not, making excuses when things are not done correctly, failing to take personal responsibility for his/her actions). These are fixable problems that can be addressed without using emotionally charged words. You may still call the person devious but that label is only dangerous if it leads you to assume the person is not worthy of being helped or you assume that since it is a question of values, the problem cannot be fixed. Once you begin to see behavior as a function of the consequences that have surrounded that behavior over many years, you begin to see how much you can do to help a person learn new ways to demonstrate values—to deal with obligations—to be viewed as a more ethical person. Again, ethics is not based on valuestatements but how those stated values show up in daily action. Learn as much as you can about behavior and be a coach, not a perpetual critic.

When employees tell the boss that something happened when it did not, the first reaction is that this employee lies. The person may be thinking, as soon as I leave I’ll go do it, and thus talk about the action as if it is complete.

A woman is like a tea bag—you can’t tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water.

— Eleanor Roosevelt



In environments where people bend the truth, the core finding is that such people have received a great deal of punishment from bosses, parents, spouses, or others for truth telling. Yes, that is right—punishment not for lying (as in bending the truth) but for telling the truth. In fact, bending the truth (lying) often allows one to escape from punishment, even to receive recognition and warm regard. As an example, when an unfinished final report was not the result wanted by the boss—“I have not finished the report”—the employee probably knows at best the reaction will be yelling and at worst, “You’re fired!” Punishment can also be subtle, but if behavior stops, it has been punished. Truth telling is unlikely to occur in such a setting. Bending the truth by saying the report is done is an escape from punishment and smiles and words of thanks from the boss are positive reinforcers for telling the lie.

Of course, to sustain ethical patterns of behavior at work, telling the truth is essential for all employees. Therefore, leaders at all levels must understand their role in promoting, not punishing, truth telling. Such an understanding is crucial for ensuring ethical behavior.

Unstated rules about telling the truth can lead to less than full disclosure. Conditions that recognize and reward truth telling, even when very uncomfortable, can lead to more truth telling so that issues can be addressed and potentially unethical deeds redirected. Once you learn more about behavior, you can understand better how rules (shoulds and oughts) versus

the consequences that follow our actions can control and influence the ethical conditions, or lack thereof, in your workplace.



HONEST SELF-ASSESSMENT

To increase ethical behavior, do not look to what people say they do, rather, look at what they do and at the impact of their behavior. Lead by example and pay close attention to how your own actions increase or decrease certain behaviors in others. Honest self-assessment is the first step to an ethical work life. Regularly perform a self-evaluation and question your own motives and behavior. For example, what appears to me to be righteous behavior might seem to others to be rigid and insensitive. I may see holding fast to a rule as more important than whether that rule could lead to bad outcomes. If I know this is my tendency, then I am more likely to avoid this type of behavior—but do not forget, not without help. Behavior learned well is hard to change without that closely held mirror that can show us not what we believe the impact is, but what it really is. That is why we call our well-learned patterns (the good and the ugly) of behaving (or as some might say, our consistent character) as occurring at “habit strength.”

**Women, like men,
should try to do
the impossible.
And when they
fail, their failure
should be a chal-
lenge to others.**

— Amelia Earhart

STEP 2: MAKE OPEN DIALOGUE POSSIBLE

As women, we tend to think that we are great listeners and conversationalists, and we talk more easily than men about “feeling” topics. But we, too, may be guilty of closing the door on dialogue when we’re in charge. In Martha Stewart’s own TV version of *The Apprentice*, which aired a few years ago, Martha’s catchphrase was, “You just don’t fit in.” Sure, this is only entertainment designed for viewer ratings and to eliminate various candidates, but the words she chose could have a muting and even hurtful effect if used in the real world. The words, “You just don’t fit in,” convey more than just a rejection for the particular position but something more personal, something “wrong” with that person beyond job skills. The unintended effect of such words,

spoken by those in positions of power, can shut the door on employee risk-taking and become a perceived underground “rule” about when to voice an opinion (if ever). Employees may avoid unpopular or really tough subjects for fear of “not fitting in.”

In the work venue, managers and executives should ensure that employees

have an option other than gossip for voicing complaints and for making constructive suggestions. Managers must seek out the evaluative critique of employees and encourage an environment in which subjects with ethical implications can be discussed without fear of subtle or blatant retaliation. An open dialogue requires a reciprocal commitment between

managers and employees to treat one another with respect. This type of environment will never occur if people perceive that such discussions will be used against them or that they are subsequently labeled as malcontents. The freedom to discuss issues without negative repercussions (or grudges) is a sign of an ethical workplace.

STEP 3: LIVE THE EXAMPLE

We should attempt to act with honesty and integrity in all of our life events, but the work world presents new complexities. The workplace is not a democracy, but a venue in which some are reported to and others report. This hierarchal structure can create situations in which those in charge forgo common courtesies. Hotel entrepreneur Leona Helmsley’s employees dubbed her the “Queen of Mean” for her verbal lashings and vicious firings. She is a perfect example of a woman in a position of authority not wielding power ethically. On the other hand, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held one of the most powerful positions in the world, yet she maintained admirable grace and courtesy in her dealings with both her proponents and detractors.

If it is unacceptable for your employees to slam doors, yell, or make derisive remarks, then don’t do so yourself. When you use negative techniques to get what you want, employees are afraid to tell the truth about a late product arrival or a customer complaint. Such aversive tactics are doubly unethical when you are in a position to control the consequences for another person.

STEP 4: BE ACCOUNTABLE

During tough times, tough decisions must be made, but many executives exempt themselves from what the larger society judges to be ethical behavior. For example, some argue

**Watch your thoughts,
they become words.
Watch your words, they
become actions. Watch
your actions, they be-
come habits. Watch
your habits, they be-
comes character. Watch
your character, it be-
comes your destiny.**

– Frank Outlaw



that Carleton “Carly” Fiorina, the deposed president and CEO of Hewlett Packard Company, was unduly criticized because she was a woman in a high-profile position. The American public may have expected her to show more sensitivity to the ethical implications of her actions, to have exhibited more awareness in regard to personal gain over common good. While she may have questioned the correctness of her compensation behind closed doors, she didn’t cut back on her \$69 million salary, two corporate jets, and five bodyguards as HP terminated 10,000 employees and cut the salaries of thousands more. Her actions were legal, but were they ethical? She acted like many executives in similar positions. The burden was no greater for her because she was a woman. Even if she had cut her own salary, just as many people would probably have been laid off—but what a powerful message she would have sent!

Currently, there are now more discussions of caps for executive compensation—a pay for performance notion. Imposed regulations will escalate if individuals do not stand up for reason and fairness on this issue. Fiorina did what has long been done, but she set no new benchmarks for female leadership in this area.

Few of us will ever be offered such perks, but we should remember that we learn to justify inequities that are in our favor one step at a time. It’s easy to weasel out of self-as-

essment if no one else holds us accountable. Repeated behaviors turn into habits and, as Dr. Phil McGraw often states, “The only way to change a bad habit is to replace it with a good one.” Change isn’t always easy; but it’s almost always possible. Tell a trusted coworker about your personal improvement goals and ask him or her to hold you accountable. And, if you ask your employees to make sacrifices, make those sacrifices yourself; that may not be the rule, but it is the ethical choice.

STEP 5: REWARD YOURSELF AND OTHERS

In her book, *High-Maintenance Employees*, Katherine Graham-Leviss writes, “Go beyond the Golden Rule. Don’t treat people the way you want to be treated; treat them the way they want to be treated.” We aren’t all alike and we don’t all want the same types of recognition. Some people love public hoopla; others hate it. Some people want creative opportunities, while others might just appreciate a sincere thank you. Find out the differences and let people know what is important to you as well.



Executives should reward the ethical behavior that leads to an end goal with the same enthusiasm that they reward the result. If you're not in a leadership position, treat yourself the way you want to be treated. Don't become a self-righteous pain, but make decisions seeking a balance between the rights of others, justice, the common good, and self-interest. Then tell yourself, "I made the right choice" and feel good about it!

These basic steps lead to great things, and they direct us away from dangerous territory. When we are diligent in the small honesties, we also are more likely to do the right thing when really put to the test. Are these steps any different for women than they are for men? Not really, but women may be more prone to take them. A survey of MBA students revealed that women were more likely to consider the ethical culture of a prospective employer and were more likely than men to ask ques-

tions concern-
ing company
values during a
job interview.
An Aspen Insti-
tute survey of
students from a

**In our society, the women
who break down barriers
are those who ignore limits.**

— Arnold Schwarzenegger

dozen of America's leading business schools showed that 82 percent of women versus 72 percent of men agreed that it is very important for an organization to be managed "according to its values and a strong code of ethics."

Of course, both sexes at every employment level can examine and improve their workplace ethics. However, if you are in a

position to mold and enforce company values, you must mobilize ethical workplace codes and create systems that reward the right business practices. Gilligan concluded that women are not inferior (or superior) in their moral development, but different, because we focus on connections with others and lean toward exercising an "ethic of care" over an ethic of mere justice. It is this unique difference that we should utilize and integrate into our workplace interactions. Women have spent decades proving their business abilities, so we should now take a pledge to hone our ethics skills:

- Going forward we can and will set strong ethical standards at the corporate table. Ethics will be on the table in every sales meeting, production meeting, safety meeting, and boardroom meeting.
- We can and will look hard at ourselves and be open to ongoing critique. We will seek feedback about ourselves from those we like as well as those who we may or may not like but have something tough but good to tell us.
- We will look at our everyday decisions in terms of their consequences on ourselves and/or others and celebrate those moments when we or our colleagues did the right thing even if it meant not attaining something we wanted, including immediate profits.
- We will remember that attaining ethical behavior is a journey of a lifetime.

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[About the Author]

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For more than 30 years, Darnell has been dedicated to supporting clients in areas such as strategy implementation, behavioral systems redesign, and leadership development. Her expertise lies in coaching individuals and organizations towards effective behavior change and is currently working to help advance the mission of The Aubrey Daniels Institute. Darnell's greatest joy is in furthering the incredible power for bringing out the best that behavior analysis provides to others, including to her seven grandchildren.

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