TO TELL THE TRUTH: SUREFIRE CREDO FOR ETHICISTS

With madcap Corporate America stumbling about amid revelations of financial misdoings at some of the largest companies in the land, talk about ethics once again has claimed center stage.

The reports of creative accounting at Enron, WorldCom and others are big news indeed, but it doesn't take anywhere near that much to get tongues wagging about ethics. A single unsubstantiated anecdote about an isolated incident, like a meeting planner accepting a faro trip despite allegedly having no interest in the host destination, will do just fine.

Soapboxes are very appealing places to stand when the topic is someone else's bad behavior. You get a free shot at making yourself look good by contrast. But that's about the only point of climbing up there, it seems to me. Are you going to shame transgressors into changing their ways? Make society better by raising its consciousness of the nature of right vs. wrong?

Nah.

Look, people who act unethically know it, even if they don't admit it. Everyone else who hears about it knows those people did wrong, too. It's not that hard to figure out -- and yet, when people start getting up on those soapboxes, they inevitably trigger a lengthy "debate" over just what is and is not ethical. I put the word debate in quotations because it's a debatable choice of words here; in discussions about ethics, just about everyone's views are alike.

Does anyone doubt that it's not cool for a planner to take a free trip to a nice place that is not a match for the planner's group? Does anyone doubt that it's wrong for a third-party planner to book a commissionable hotel rate without the knowledge of his client, not to mention lead the hotel to believe that the client does know? Does anyone doubt that it's a no-no for a hotel to verbally agree to do something that wasn't stipulated in its contract with a group, then renege and seek refuge behind the contract? There are loads of similarly clear examples that don't require debate.

I'm not saying people should not be held accountable for their actions. Legal, regulatory and professional authorities properly exercise their roles when they administer discipline for ethical violations. What I am saying is, why pretend that the matter of ethics is a complex one?

Let me advance a very simple notion: Honesty equals ethics. Try as I might, I can't think of a scenario where, if you were honest about your motivations and intentions, you could act unethically. Certainly, in the above-cited meetings industry examples -- which are the ones that seem to come up for discussion the most -- being honest would obviate any possibility of ethical faux pas.
These thoughts have been percolating within me for some time, but they coalesced recently when some folks were tossing around the ethics of fam trips on MIMlist, the popular email-based discussion forum owned by Meeting News’ parent company.

Predictably, there was no dissent from the idea that planners ought not to take fams unless they have genuine interest in a destination or venue. Such debate as there was emanated from a few planners who said they are so mindful of the potential for acting unethically when accepting a fam -- or even merely appearing unethical -- that they make it a policy never to take a free trip; if they go, they pay.

That's their choice, but I don't think they need to go that far. Just be honest with the host of the trip. Maybe it's unlikely that your group would meet there now, but you'd appreciate the ability to build contacts for the future. Maybe your interest is lukewarm. Or maybe you're strongly considering the destination or venue, but you can't give a guarantee.

Unmentioned on MIMlist was the idea that it would be best if fam-trip hosts, too, were up-front about their own standards for who qualifies. Is marginal interest sufficient?

Perhaps, you might say, I'm on a soapbox not unlike the kind I pooh-poohed earlier. Will anyone do anything differently as a result of my comments? Well, one can always hope.

Unfortunately, a majority of people do exhibit dishonesty from time to time, despite knowing it's wrong. That's why the legend of Honest Abe is so enduring. A national symbol of the implicit value of honesty strikes a chord within us because we know it's the best policy, yet we violate it often.

While our parents taught us when we were little that we should be honest, they didn't tell us about something called ethics, so our understanding of that is more vague. But there's little to distinguish between them.

Be honest, be ethical.

By David McCann, Editor-in-Chief

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