Over the past two years the “irrational exuberance” of the 1990s has exposed what seems like a never-ending pattern of deceit, fraud and uninhibited self-interest. Headline stories have included a virtual who's who of corporate titans defending themselves in various criminal or regulatory matters, including Enron, Tyco, Arthur Andersen, Adelphia, Worldcom, ImClone, and many others.

Taken together, these headlines form an overwhelming pattern of betrayal. People are angry. They don't trust today's leaders. Many feel the game is rigged, and only the fat cats can win.

What can meeting planners do to bring appropriate attention to sound ethical practices and high standards of corporate conduct?

First, they can promote the high standards of ethical and professional conduct in their own profession by avoiding conflicts of interest by not accepting gifts that might appear to influence decision-making, refusing to disclose confidential information, refraining from using site inspections as personal vacations, and avoiding any back-end deals.

Second, corporate planners have an obligation to be familiar with, and manage, their firm's code of ethics. Rules about avoiding conflicts of interest and not accepting gifts are commonplace. In addition, most codes provide for a confidential place where violations can, and must be, reported.

Ultimately, self-regulation is by far the best way to prevent and detect wrongdoing and encourage sound business practices.

Third, planners can seek out appropriate speakers and presenters on ethics, business conduct and best practices for management conferences. Stakeholders today need to discuss the day-to-day pressures they feel and how to avoid the pitfalls so many executives find themselves in today.

Last, planners have a great opportunity to help build community. Fundamentally, a company is a community of people with common interests and shared values banded together to achieve a common goal.

Valuing Long-Term, Sustainable Excellence

Companies are places where people contribute their time, talent and energy to making products and providing services that meet the needs of others. To succeed, leaders of these companies must value long-term sustainable excellence over short-term financial gain.
Leaders must develop organizational cultures that align ethics and values to their strategies and day-to-day operating plans. "Bring your ethics to work day" is no longer an option. Leaders know that if our institutions are to be successful, growing and vitalized individuals must inhabit them.

Yes, new laws have been passed and regulations tightened to ensure that investors, consumers and employees are protected, that offenders are properly punished, and that the scrutinizers are doing their jobs. But in the end, you can't legislate trust.

Trust is built in small steps. It is extremely fragile. Trust comes from the heart. It is a sacred and emotional relationship. It is built upon a common understanding between people. In business, it is the understanding that a product will meet or exceed the customers' expectations, that the warranties made for services will be honored, and that the financial information represented to investors is honest, accurate, complete and comprehensible.

It is the understanding that the interests of our customers, employees, investors and the communities in which we do business matter more than our own self interest.

Meeting planners can help shape agendas and build a strong sense of community through planned socialization and networking.

Conferences offer the opportunity for renewal, a time away from the workplace that so often overwhelm our senses. Planners have a great opportunity to remind us of what's most essential in life, and model through their behavior the high standards we all desire. Together we can make a difference.

By Keith T. Darcy

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