Please Stop Saying “Just Do the Right Thing”

BY JAMES A. NORTZ

Now, you may think that this is an odd pet peeve for an ethics officer. After all, I get paid to help people in corporations understand what the “right thing” is and pursue it with vigor. And anyway, what could possibly be annoying about someone expressing such a laudable sentiment?

There are two reasons I find this phrase as irritating as others find loud gum chewing. First, it suggests that “the right thing” is like something you just pick up in the “right thing” section of aisle 12 in the grocery store. Second, the phrase suggests that there is just one “right thing” in each situation. The problem is that the world we live in rarely, if ever, presents situations in which there is only one completely obvious “right thing.”

Take, for example, a garden variety business issue that frequently arises in a down economy like the one we’re enduring right now. If business projections indicate that there will be a significant revenue reduction during the next 12 months, what is “the right thing” for company leadership to do? Let’s consider some of the potential options:

- Immediately lay off a segment of the workforce regardless of the hardship they and their families might face;
- Reduce capital spending plans, even though this may mean postponing projects essential to improving company efficiency and long-term competitiveness;
- Do nothing for as long as possible, hoping that the business will pick up before the money runs out;
- Cut working hours, wages or benefits; or
- Implement a combination of these options depending upon events as they unfold.

These are only a few of the potential “right things” to choose from. I can’t tell you what I think the most ethical option is in the circumstances without more facts. And it is likely that even after further analysis, I would conclude that there are a range of appropriate options. But there is one thing I can say with certainty: If someone assisting a decision-maker with such difficult choices merely advised them to “just do the right thing,” they’d likely be ignored or tossed out of the room. In addition to being annoying, the “just do the right thing” advice, no matter how well-intentioned, is perfectly worthless in resolving real-world problems.

The simple desire to find an ethical course of action is only the starting point and, in most businesses, it’s taken for granted. Generally speaking, the choices under serious consideration by honorable business professionals are not between “right and wrong” but between “right and right.” The example provided above is a case in point. All of the options might be morally justifiable in the circumstances. There is no single “right thing” in this or the myriad other circumstances business professionals face daily. And many important decisions — especially those that will have a profound impact on peoples’ lives — are gut-wrenching because discerning which option is the best one to pursue is anything but obvious.

Moral philosophers have written tomes on strategies for making ethical judgments. Those that I have read disagree about many things, but they do seem to agree on one: There is no mathematical formula for finding the best “right thing.” Instead, they generally advise readers to gain a full understanding of the facts, identify all viable options and their consequences, consider the relevant rules and/or values, and strike a principled balance between competing interests. In the end, an ethical course of action is one that can be justified with a rational statement articulating clearly the reasons why it is consistent with applicable moral principles and is the best option available in the circumstances. The quality of any chosen course of action is judged by how well its supporting rationale can withstand the scrutiny of other fair-minded people.

My guess is that few of us are born with the natural discipline and competence to do this well. Instead, it takes regular practice — both on the job and during training sessions — to master this essential management skill. So next time you’re assisting in resolving a particularly difficult business problem, screech your fingernails on the chalkboard if you think it will help. But please, resist the impulse to say: “Just do the right thing.”

Have a comment on this article?
Email editorinchief@acc.com.