

Ethical Leadership

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The use of technology requires strong ethical leadership if society is to benefit from research advances. Unfortunately this does not always happen.

On 11 July 2007 at the launch of the annual report for 2006/07, Richard Thomas, the Information Commissioner, said: "Over the last year we have seen far too many careless and inexcusable breaches of people's personal information. The roll call of banks, retailers, government departments, public bodies and other organisations which have admitted serious security lapses is frankly horrifying." Indeed, in February 2007, the ICO found Alliance & Leicester, Barclays Bank, Clydesdale Bank, Co-operative Bank, HBOS, HFC Bank, Nationwide Building Society, Natwest, Royal Bank of Scotland, Scarborough Building Society, The Post Office and United National Bank in breach of the Data Protection Act and ordered them to sign formal undertakings.

Thomas continued: "How can laptops holding details of customer accounts be used away from the office without strong encryption? How can millions of store cards fall into the wrong hands? How can online recruitment allow applicants to see each others' forms? How can any bank chief executive face customers and shareholders and admit that loan rejections, health insurance applications, credit cards and bank statements can be found, unsecured in non-confidential waste bags?"

The Information Commissioner added: "Business and public sector leaders must take their data protection obligations more seriously. The majority of organisations process personal information appropriately - but privacy must be given more priority in every UK boardroom. Organisations that fail to process personal information in line with the Principles of the Data Protection Act not only risk enforcement action by the ICO, they also risk losing the trust of their customers."

When a technological advance is applied to resolve a real world problem or to provide a new product or service it often raises unanticipated moral implications. The lack of adequate safeguards leading to breaches in privacy illustrates this. This clearly points to a need for improved leadership.

In her 2005 Coca Cola Lecture "Ethical Leadership for the 21st Century" at Morehouse College, Dr Shirley Ann Jackson, President of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute suggested there were six principles of leadership regarding technological innovation.

- Integrity "This means holding to the highest standards and setting an ethical example - on a continuous basis."
- Vision "There are two kinds - vision which sets the tone and the direction, and which must be rooted in a clear-eyed view of the big picture, and vision to delineate the complex, intertwined ethical questions, amid their larger context and their implications for society at large."
- Courage "To lead requires the courage to make, and to stand by, difficult choices"
- Engagement This is "of others in coming to a principled stand on a difficult issue, and in getting others to join you in staying the course. In addition, engaging constituencies and enlisting participation enable the decision-making to profit from multiple insights and creative energies."
- Language "Language helps set the tone and can include - or exclude. Language has the capacity to elevate the discussion, drawing the best from participants."
- Action "One must be willing to act, not merely to believe. Action is needed to fashion practical approaches"

Such principles can be translated into practical organisational policy and initiatives. For example, Robert H Dunn speaking at the Ethical Leadership Forum 2000 in Hong Kong suggested that ethical companies involved in internet business should have at least the following characteristics.

- "A strong statement of company values, an ethical framework applied to all business decisions, and an explicit acknowledgement that all aspects of business operations, including ethical values, apply in cyberspace."
- "An ethics-based code of conduct that goes beyond legal compliance, and gives specific guidance on cyber ethics challenges"
- "High visibility support for the ethics program on the part of senior managers"
- "Effective, ongoing communications and training that address the special ethical challenges of operating in cyberspace"
- "Helping resources to support employees in making good and timely decisions"
- "Clear rewards and sanctions that hold people accountable"
- "Some system of stakeholder engagement to ensure that you are adequately addressing and balancing the ethical concerns of all those impacted by your decisions."

In her lecture, Jackson concluded: "In today's wi-fi, hot-wired, hyper-linked, 24-7-365 on-line world, however, leadership challenges are no longer single, or simple. They intertwine and reach beyond a single community to touch communities across the entire planet. Ethical leadership in this environment ultimately is answerable to a global community. Leadership which is effective must take into account a vast array of needs, capacities, skills, backgrounds, perspectives, cultures, languages - and, yes, hopes. For it is hope which ultimately lifts the human spirit, and motivates people to take ethical stands and to act on them." The challenge is to address this positively so that organisations will, as Dunn points out: "explore ways they can harness new information technologies to promote ethical behaviour - not simply to build a firewall against the risks that technology creates."

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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