

LEAD

IBD'S 10 SECRETS TO SUCCESS

Investor's Business Daily has spent years analyzing leaders and successful people in all walks of life. Most have 10 traits that, when combined, can turn dreams into reality. Each day, we highlight one.

10 BE HONEST AND DEPENDABLE; TAKE RESPONSIBILITY: Otherwise, Nos. 1-9 won't matter.

Take Ethics Personally

10 People are much more likely to act ethically if they perceive themselves as personally responsible for the outcomes of their decisions and actions. That can be a problem in organizations, where responsibility is often diffused.

"In organizations, an individual often becomes disconnected from the consequences of his or her actions," said Linda Trevino, professor of organizational behavior at Pennsylvania State University's Smeal College of Business Administration. "If no individual feels the need to take responsibility, in the end no one does, and unethical behavior is more likely."

But management can do much to increase individual responsibility, Trevino says in her book, "Managing Business Ethics." Four roadblocks need to be removed:

■ **The 'We'll take care of it' response.** At work, individuals are often encouraged to turn responsibility over to their superiors. If, for example, they express concern about a safety or environmental problem, they might be told, "We appreciate your concern, but you don't need to worry about it."

But that can cause problems down the road, Trevino says. People will come to believe it isn't their responsibility to be on the lookout for ethical violations and might stop warning superiors of potential problems.

"When a subordinate brings up an ethical concern, don't take it completely off his or her hands," she suggested. "Or, if it becomes necessary to do so, be sure to keep the individual informed of the progress and outcome of the decision."

■ **Groupthink syndrome.** This occurs when people in a cohesive

group conform to the decision they think most group members prefer. They tend to censor themselves out of a need to belong, even when their conscience says otherwise.

The group leader can combat groupthink, Trevino says. First, don't state a preference for a decision upfront. Second, appoint one or more devil's advocates to question the group's decisions, as it's easier to take an alternative stance when it's a person's role to do so. Finally, make it clear that each and every group member will be responsible for the outcome of any group decision.

■ **Divided responsibility.** Responsibility in organizations is often so divided that people see themselves as only a small cog in a large machine, Trevino says. While this division is essential for the kind of specialization required in today's jobs, it also means people do their jobs with blinders on. "That's not my job" becomes a common reaction. They don't take responsibility for the bigger picture.

Fewer organizational levels is one answer, Trevino says, as it makes it harder for people to rationalize their actions in that way. It's also helpful to spell out the expectations for specific positions upfront and hold people to those expectations.

■ **Psychological distance.** When those affected by decisions are out of sight, it's harder to see oneself as responsible for negative outcomes. In fact, it's easier to make the "hurtful" or "unethical" decision to begin with.

Arranging personal visits to distant work sites as well as personal contact with customers can decrease this psychological distance, Trevino says, and increase the felt responsibility for any actions taken.

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