

Practicing What We Preach

(Published August 2, 2009)

By Alvin Clay III

Whether the target is a public figure or someone in our work, family or social circles, we have little time or sympathy for a person who says one thing and then does another -- doesn't practice what they preach. Of all the insults and accusations we can hurl at one another, there is perhaps none that stings more than the charge "Hypocrite!" As a consequence, most of us are very careful not to get ourselves caught in that trap.

It shouldn't have been a surprise to me then, the course of a recent conversation with a group of business leaders. The context of the meeting is not relevant, but it led to a discussion of business ethics -- specifically the practice of businesses making public statements about their ethical business practices. The exchange started with me making what I thought was a non-controversial reference to an Ethics Statement. What followed was a comment by an attendee at the meeting -- someone whom I know well and know to be an ethical person and CEO -- that he didn't believe in Ethics Statements.

His concern was that if we make a public statement about ethics, as soon as we need to make a difficult business decision, that someone will be waiving the ethics statement in our face. My immediate flippant response was "So what?" Just because a business decision was difficult or unpopular doesn't make it unethical. Was my friend suggesting that he didn't want to be accountable? Did he want wiggle room? One of the other participants spoke up and said that when he quit smoking, he told everybody he knew, to make it more difficult for him to shirk his commitment. We responded to the CEO's concern with a righteous rebuke.

So the obvious conclusion is that my friend was wrong and I was right. Not so fast. The difficulty is that ethical behavior is often in the eyes of the beholder. For example, if a company states: "We will not be undersold," it is relatively easy for them to abide by that statement -- it's just money -- not ethics. But if a company states that they will uphold a high standard of ethics, someone could (perhaps unfairly) accuse them of unethical behavior because of layoffs or price increases or environmental impact -- things that at the very least are subject to interpretation.

I know by writing this column, or preaching on Sunday (my other side job), I place myself under a certain kind of scrutiny. It can be uncomfortable. We all

make mistakes and all have flaws and don't relish the prospect of having them examined under a microscope.

So what are we to do? Not take a stand? Not tell the public the standards we have set for our businesses? That doesn't sound right. On the other hand, should we make sweeping high-minded statements about our values and leave it at that? That's probably not the right answer either. Such an approach is so subjective that we can be held accountable for everything or for nothing. It's meaningless.

I suggest an approach that I have admittedly not yet taken in my own company, but now intend to: Create and promulgate a list of specific, measurable practices or behaviors that are important to your customers and germane to your business. They could include the transparency of fees, independence of vendor relationships, policies on the handling of errors or refunds, hiring practices, or many others. If you have a code of ethics with specific requirements that employees must sign, you should consider making it available on your website. If you don't have one, consider carefully and thoughtfully crafting one. If you are worried about being held accountable, either the code of ethics is poorly written and needs work, or you know the tenets of your code are not being followed and some corporate soul searching is in order. Either way, there is work to be done.

None of this is a guarantee that we won't occasionally be charged, fairly or unfairly, with taking action that is inconsistent with our stated values. So be it. Sometimes we need to have a thick skin. But it certainly beats the alternative – standing for nothing and hiding from accountability.