Ethics…Whose Responsibility Anyway?

Why have we become the most litigious society to ever exist? Some would say it’s because we have too many lawyers. But think about it, lawyers would not exist if there were not ample litigation to keep them working. Others would say we are litigious because there is a void in ethical leadership; and, here they blame our politicians, law enforcement official, clergy, and some even blame the media.

The truth is the fault lies with each of us because individually we have abdicated our responsibility for this moral breakdown. Somehow, we have allowed our personal influence to be relegated to a secondary position, because of our willingness to accept positions in life as victims. Or worse, we refuse to accept and utilize the power we possess to make a difference.

In reality each of us has the power to make a difference and steer our society in a positive direction. Our actions and behaviors influence the people we encounter in our daily lives. We readily think of our families in this regard, but we don’t always consider the influence we have on coworkers, waiters, store clerks and all the other people we encounter daily. How we treat them can and does influence how they treat others.

When motives behind the rash of massacres in the work place, schools and other locales are analyzed, it’s discovered that many of the perpetrators cite poor treatment by others as the caused of their rage. Some individual, who was too engrossed in their own personal needs to consider the need of others, had incited them. As a result ill will and hatred was created.

In our zeal to fulfill on our short-term needs, we forget the need to be concerned with the long-term implications of our actions. These ethical lapses can cause pain that sometimes transforms into terror. If we want to change the ethical direction of our society we have to change ourselves.

Michael Jackson sings a song about the Man in the Mirror. I’m paraphrasing but it says something like, “If you want the world to be a better place, ask the man in the mirror to change his ways.”

Individually, we have to accept and understand that if we want the world to be better, we can’t just let it be. We have to take a stand to change it. Each of us has to accept responsibility for ethical leadership, by conducting our affairs with honesty and integrity. Regardless of what others do, we must stand for what’s right and demonstrate through our actions and behaviors that we are willing to be personally accountable.
Do your part by being an ethical leader. The responsibility for changing the world belongs to us all.

The world is full of contradictions which make it difficult, at times, to know what is right from wrong. When you come to these crossroads that cause you to pause to consider what might be the appropriate action, take *The Ethics Test*:

- Is it legal?
- Is it fair and moral?
- Will I be able to live with myself?

If the answer is no to any of them, then you will know not to go forward with whatever you are contemplating.

1. *Is it legal?* This is simple! Will I break any laws? Whether they are legal agreements, laws or codes, will my actions break any of them? If the answer is yes it would be illegal or break an agreement, then don’t do it. If it isn’t legal, don’t do it.

2. *Is it Fair and Moral?* Ask yourself if the action you are about to take was being taken by someone else and it would affect your parents, partner, siblings, relatives or friends. What action would you want them to take? If it not the one you are about to make, then don’t do it. When faced with cross road decisions filter them through the eyes of loved ones, and it becomes easier to be fair and moral.

3. *Can I live with myself?* Personal responsibility is the ultimate litmus test for doing the right things. Imagine your actions being reported as front-page news. Will you be embarrassed or proud? Will you hide behind your hat or stand tall? What will your children say? How will they feel when the news of your decision is reported? If the answer is that you would be embarrassed, don’t do it.

Thom McKinney is a speaker, trainer and facilitator. He can be reached at (704) 752-0281 or thom@thommckinney.com.