

Setting the

How HR professionals
can be a corporation's ethics watchers.

BY NEIL B. ZAMBIK, CHRP

High ethical and moral standards, corporate values, integrity and honesty are words often used by organizations in their annual reports to describe their principles. But what do these words really mean given recent business scandals? With legislation rolling out in both the U.S. and Canada to hold CEOs accountable for the accuracy of a company's financial statements, will this represent a new era for ethical standards? Or will it just be business as usual? And how does the human resources professional fit in?

The HR professional's role.

The Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP), along with all HR practitioners, is expected to uphold the values and ethics of his or her organization. Senior management often places this burden of responsibility directly on the HR department. Many organizations have ethics guidelines and corporate values that are prominently displayed in the corporate lobby. However, when talking to employees in the lunchroom, they often laugh about the gap between the stated values and "the way it really works around here." In listening more closely to these conversations, the talk frequently surrounds comments that the HR department will not stand up to senior management to ensure that the corporate values and ethics of the company are truly lived in all cases. It seems sometimes that there are "special rules" for some people.

How are HR professionals to meet this high standard of accountability? Are we confident enough to stand up for what is right and thereby operate in a fully ethical manner?

Below are steps that we can take to ensure that these standards are truly being lived within our businesses.

- 1. Look at yourself.** Review the CHRP Code of Ethics in full detail (available to all HR professionals from www.bchrma.org) and compare this to your work situations. Are you always meeting these standards?
- 2. Look at your organization.** Are there corporate ethics and values publicly stated for your company? If not, why not? Are they shared with employees as well as all of the stakeholders to your business (such as suppliers, customers, directors, business partners or contractors)? Does the culture allow for unethical behaviour to occur?

3. Look at yourself again. Are you truly willing to take on the responsibility for ethical behaviour in the company? Do you have the ability to stand up to anyone in the organization when you witness unethical behaviour? Are you willing to do the right thing at all costs? Is our own behaviour in total harmony with the CHRP Code of Ethics and your organization's values and ethics both on and off the job?

The expectation on HR professionals is extremely high and important. Being viewed in many cases as the holders of the corporate culture, we can't afford to fail. Let's look at these areas in further detail.

1. Look at yourself.

In British Columbia, CHRPs have operated under a Code of Ethics which includes the following principles: competence; responsibility; legal and community standards; confidentiality; respect for individuals; and adherence to this Code of Ethics

As with any professional designation, the Code of Ethics outlines expectations for all holders of the particular designation. These expectations become the standard for how the profession is viewed to the outside world. As holders of the CHRP designation, it is imperative that we all live these standards to ensure that our profession becomes truly recognized for the value that we can contribute to organizational success.

The national standards for the CHRP (effective March 2003), will have a new Code of Ethics, which, while along the same lines as the current CHRP Code, will also include disciplinary action for designation holders who fail to live up to these standards. When the new code is released, take the time to read it and make sure that you are living it all the time. It may be a good idea to post the Code in your workspace so others can refer to it when handling difficult situations.

2. Look at your organization.

There are a number of steps to follow in reviewing your organization to determine how well ethics are being lived. Here are some for your consideration.

- **Conduct a cultural assessment:** Determine the current state of your organization as it relates to ethics and values. Conduct surveys