

Unethical behaviour declines in private sector - SABES 2013

There has been a marked decrease in the instances of misconduct observed by private sector employees in South Africa. This is one of the positive findings of the South African Business Ethics Survey (SABES) 2013 in which 4099 employees in 15 companies were surveyed.



The survey is the third of its kind conducted by the Ethics Institute of Southern Africa (EthicsSA) in the private sector.

"These findings demonstrate that the concerted efforts by companies to ensure that their ethics is managed effectively - as required by Principle 1.3 of the King III Report - are paying off," says Deon Rossouw, CEO of EthicsSA.

The good news

Another three areas that showed a significant improvement since the previous survey in 2009 are:

- An increase in awareness of aspects of ethics programmes, such as codes of ethics, ethics training and safe reporting systems;
- Employees reporting a reduction in organisational pressure to engage in unethical conduct;
- Fewer people indicating the existence of situations inviting unethical conduct.

According to Rossouw, the survey demonstrates a clear correlation between a strong ethical culture and positive ethical behaviour by employees.

"This strong ethical culture that exists in certain companies creates an environment in which employees are more likely to report unethical conduct and less likely to experience pressure to compromise ethical standards," he says. "In addition, should employees observe unethical conduct - which they are less likely to do now than they were four years ago - it is reported that they generally feel better prepared to deal with these and other such difficult ethical situations."

The bad news

However, concerning one disconcerting finding in the survey, Rossouw says there has been no significant shift in the ethical culture of companies, despite the advances in ethics management that were made since the previous survey was conducted. "Essentially, the survey indicates that the ethical culture rating of companies remained more or less on the same levels as in 2009."

This suggests that many South African businesses have a compliance approach to managing ethics, viewing it as a 'tick-box exercise', instead of a tool to create positive change in organisational culture.

"Most companies seem to focus on monitoring and managing their ethics performance, in order to ensure that their employees abide by ethical standards, rather than focusing on efforts to internalise company values and standards in employees' behaviour," he says.

"It's a bit like paying more attention to the symptoms of an illness, rather than focusing on the cause of the problem."

Additional areas that have shown a negative trend since 2009 are that ethics management interventions are seen to be less effective, and that employees are less willing to report unethical behaviour.

However, Rossouw concludes, "Companies' willingness to commit to the development and implementation of formal ethics management programmes bodes well for the future of South African business."

For more information and to download a copy of the report, go to www.ethicssa.co.za.

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