

Alice, the 10-year-old ethicist

By Stephen Gauer

Is there any entity on the planet more predictable than a giant corporation? In typical copycat fashion, Nortel Networks has overreacted to its recent accounting misadventures by creating the post of Chief Ethics Officer.

The CEO's mandate is to get the company back on the straight and narrow, in part by setting up training programs so Nortel employees know what kind of behaviour is expected of them.

Forget it, Nortel! Too slow. Too expensive. Too many meetings.

I have a much better idea: use the nifty little ethics training program I put together last night during one of those irritating tooth whitening commercials with the help of Alice, my 10-year-old niece.

I've written it down on a big yellow sticky. It goes like this:

1. All employees assemble in one large room
2. Alice stands on a chair at the front of the room
3. Alice says six words: "Lying, cheating and stealing are wrong."
4. All employees go back to work

This low-tech program has many virtues. It covers all the key points. Properly executed, it shouldn't take much more than

five minutes. The only hardware required is a chair strong enough to support a 80-pound child. There's no paperwork, no fancy graphics or special effects, no PowerPoint presentation, no need for a network connection in the meeting room.

"I have a gong I can bring in case people at the back don't stop talking," Alice says. "This worked great at school when I gave my science report last month."

Human nature being what it is, follow-up training may be required for certain Nortel staff. Alice has worked out a number of strategies. For example, she suggests we gather all the senior accountants in one large room and explain to them why decimal points in their Excel spreadsheets should never be allowed to stray from their original positions, and why they won't be fired if a quarterly statement shows a loss.

If this doesn't do the trick, she says, the next step is to blindfold all the senior vice-presidents, stuff them into a van, drive them out to a cheap motel in Scarborough, and then force feed them her mother's fried tofu with spicy green beans until they agree that the only quarterly profit worthy of being called a profit is an honest-to-God profit.

The last resort, for any remaining hard-core cases who still don't get it, will be a Boot Camp for Capitalists every summer on my front lawn. Recalcitrant Nortel executives will run lemonade stands for five days in order to re-acquaint themselves with the day-to-day reality of that fundamental formula of modern business:

$$\text{Profit} = \text{Total Sales} \text{ minus } \text{Total Costs}$$

They'll buy lemons, ice, water, sugar, glasses, pitchers from me. I'll rent them the booth and vendor space on my front lawn. Then they'll do their best to run the booths at a profit, keeping any money left over at the end of the week once costs have been deducted from sales.

Alice, whose mathematical skills are flawless, has offered to provide auditing services for my boot camp capitalists. "There'll be no funny stuff," she says. "Quarters, loonies, toonies—that's the only revenue I'll recognize."

Since some Nortel executives seem to have a fuzzy idea of how you calculate the profit of a business, regular 10-minute workshops will be held every morning on this topic, using pen and paper, with no correcting, erasing or white-out allowed. Laptops will be safely stored in a vault in my basement for the duration of the boot camp.

Alice is quite looking forward to the implementation of our ethics training program. She sees ethics as a promising corporate career path. "Boys always want to cheat, that's for sure," she said. "I see it every day."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know. They're just kind of dumb that way."

Alice made a face when I told her that some US corporations have set up snitch lines to encourage employees to rat on dishonest employees. She said that in her experience as a fifth grader snitching tends to poison the classroom environment.

“We’re already paranoid enough,” she said. “Besides, these are adults, right? Shouldn’t they just know better?”

I told Alice she had a point.

Nortel, we’re waiting for your call.