

Sharing Ideas and Successful Practices in Business Ethics 2008

The fifth European Business Ethics Forum took place in London in January. What is unique about this conference, hosted jointly by ECOA, the Institute of Business Ethics (UK), the European Business Ethics Network and the Cercle d'Éthique des Affaires-Cercle Européen des Déontologues (France)?

First, is that participants are made up in the main of practitioners in business ethics and compliance. Second, the emphasis is on sharing. Most presenters are invited from the participants themselves – everyone is considered to have an expertise or experience worth sharing. This results in a trusting and friendly atmosphere.

This year over 115 practitioners from US and European companies and subsidiaries enjoyed two illuminating plenary sessions. The first was delivered by Richard Olver, Chairman of BAE Systems. Richard referred to the huge influence that business can wield in being a force for good and the responsibility they must therefore recognise. The application of a business ethics policy is a test of good leadership in a global context where a consistent corporate culture can not be taken for granted. All systems in the organisation need to be aligned to support an ethics culture, from performance reviews to reporting. Lively discussion with the audience included what performance indicators were best for ethics and what companies could do about facilitation payments. Richard's message was to focus on keeping solutions simple.

The plenary speaker for the second day was Mark Pyman of Transparency International (UK). Mark described his experiences in the 1980s being responsible for dealing with corrupt practices in Africa while in a large oil company. Problems were dealt with locally and quietly and were not shared with HQ. This fuelled his interest in how organisations might best handle the challenging conversations that imply a need to change the way business is done. Mark talked about Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and the Business Principles for Countering Bribery – a framework and implementation tool. He suggested three areas for businesses to consider: i) how to investigate bribery, ii) how to phase out facilitation payments and iii) how to report on bribery and corruption such as numbers prosecuted or dismissed.

During the conference, three programmes of five concurrent and interactive breakout sessions allowed participants to share their experiences with each other on topics ranging from how to assure on the effectiveness of our ethics programmes, privacy issues, the use of ethical scenarios in training, the ethics of intelligence gathering, good practice in supplier monitoring and how best to involve the ethics function in policy and strategy issues.

The participants enjoyed diner at the historic and atmospheric Stationers Hall, thanks to sponsorship by Serco.

Planning for EBEF 2009 in Paris is already underway and "save the date" notices will be posted soon.

Some comments from EBEF 2008 participants

- *It was a fantastic opportunity to share experiences and get ideas for moving our ethics programme forward.*
- *The perspective of ethics in business from thought-leaders in UK is particular value to me as a US company officer, there were lessons learned.*
- *Great for the quality of the debate, subjects of the plenary sessions and the breakout sessions.*
- *Good mix of experience to network with. Dialogue in breakouts good because groups small. Plenary sessions very interactive too.*
- *The right people prepared for honest discussion. The right format, lots of topics*
- *There were multiple opportunities to hear from and network with people from a variety of organisations and sectors with very different and useful perspectives.*