

Signaling standards:

How ethical 'rules of the road' can build trust

Like traffic signs helping drivers stay safe, effective ethics training can assist organizations in protecting reputation and navigating risk.

Think back to the first time you placed your hands on the steering wheel as a newly licensed driver.

The credential in your wallet indicated that you had studied the driver's manual, practiced in traffic, and passed the exam.

You had also learned a vast system of signs and signals and norms, the everyday rules of the road that merge millions of individual decisions into order and keep the path safer for all.

Now imagine the roads without a system—no traffic lights, guardrails, or signage to help motorists work together safely. What if, instead, safety on the streets depended entirely on a single education class, the minimum requirement to check the box and collect a license? Traffic safety would rely on every driver somehow remembering each moment of that course when tooling a neighborhood or speeding toward a city intersection.

For transportation to run well and deliver everyone to their destinations unscathed, every driver needs far more support than one-time instruction. They need an entire system built to help everyone operate safely together.

This is a useful way to think about Ethics Engagement, the learning pillar in Deloitte's 4 E's of ethical leadership. Organizational ethics works much like road safety, in that one annual course can't carry a culture alone. It requires a comprehensive system.

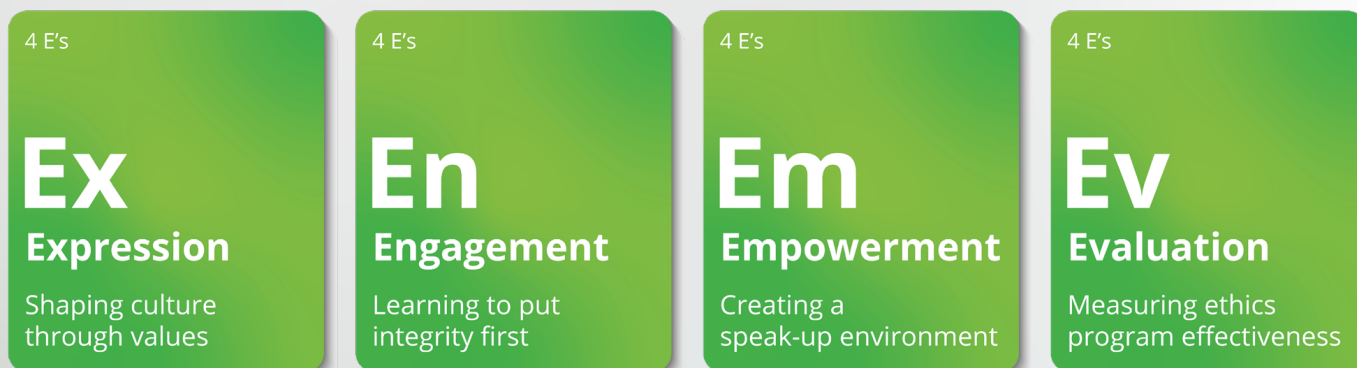


How learning supports ethical culture

In any organization, employees make numerous critical choices each day. Whether they respond ethically when pressured to meet a sales goal, satisfy a customer, or meet investor expectations depends in large part on how deeply values are integrated into the corporate culture.

Exceptional organizations reinforce culture through ethical leadership, which means pairing [tone at the top](#) with practices that embed ethical values and conduct throughout an organization. To assist organizations in this endeavor, Deloitte designed a framework defining the four elements of ethical leadership, or the [4 E's](#): Expression, Engagement, Empowerment, and Evaluation.

The four elements of ethical leadership | The 4 E's



As it teaches road rules, effective driver's education also builds judgment. Simulated scenarios teach hazard perception and help drivers develop mental habits that allow them to respond correctly during the unexpected.

Much like driver education combined with clear signage and rules of the road, Ethics Engagement focuses on continual learning and training opportunities for the drivers of any business: its people. The ethics equivalent of driver's education—case-based learning, scenario simulation, psychological safety practice, ethical reasoning frameworks—is not a nice-to-have. It is infrastructure. It builds and strengthens an ethical culture by giving employees tools to help them make decisions that place integrity first and protect themselves, their colleagues, and their organizations.

The stakes for this are incredibly high. Ethical breaches, such as corruption, fraud, or data mishandling, can result in significant financial and reputational damage to an organization or to the individuals who work there. When everyone understands the organization's values and how to live them—along with how to respond if they are broken—the organization is set up to answer with immediacy. Like a traffic light that prevents collisions and keeps cars moving efficiently, organizational values can create the kind of order that enables speed and throughput.

Data supports the idea of organizational culture, bolstered by learning, as a safeguard against ethical collisions. Findings from the Ethics & Compliance Initiative's Global Business Ethics Survey as reported in "The State of Ethics & Compliance in the Workplace—United States Trends" show that employees working in a strong ethical culture are 80% less likely to observe misconduct than those working in weak ethical cultures.¹



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Source: "The State of Ethics & Compliance in the Workplace—United States Trends," Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2024



While **more than half** of surveyed
business leaders recognize
the importance of managing
how AI affects culture,
ONLY 5%
are making great progress.



Source: "2026 Global Human Capital Trends," Deloitte Global

In addition, the rise of artificial intelligence lends particular urgency to prioritizing culture. Whether AI's output is ethical and in line with organizational values depends on how well those principles have been instilled in the people creating and using the technology—which happens in part through learning and ethical culture-building.

Given that AI is led by humans and is reshaping the human work experience, failing to address workforce culture presents its own risks. Deloitte's [2026 Global Human Capital Trends](#) reveals that AI use at organizations may be creating a steady, unnoticed accumulation of negative organizational cultural behaviors.

The report found that while even strong cultures will require reinforcement amid AI's influence, the introduction of AI into weak cultures can degrade them further.² Leaders that accept outdated or misaligned organizational cultures run the risk of eroding trust and sacrificing competitiveness.³

The study further notes that 57% of those surveyed recognize the importance of understanding and managing how AI impacts culture, trust, and collaboration, yet only 5% are making great progress toward that goal.⁴ CEOs and executive leaders—especially those implementing AI—should evaluate their organizational cultures and map how their learning programming supports their ideal future state.

Signs of effective ethics learning

Although training should be tailored to fit each organization's individual needs, successful learning initiatives share many common elements, the "signs" that embed ethical rules of the road.



Clarifying expectations at periodic intervals

It's not enough to put up one sign and expect everyone to remember it. Learning should happen regularly and continually at all levels, starting on day one. New hires need to understand expectations right away, and organizations should reinforce them across the workforce through periodic refreshers. Workers being promoted or transferred to new business units may need additional development, as their new roles can bring about a different slate of ethical considerations.



Updating content to reflect current issues

Challenges and risks are constantly evolving, so learning should reflect realistic ethical dilemmas—especially timely scenarios like how AI integration is reshaping business. That means identifying emerging ethical risks, understanding what your people and industry are encountering, and updating learning content accordingly. Just as a traffic pattern is adjusted to reach the same destination via a different route, day-to-day systems and incentives should reinforce an organization's values. In that type of values-based culture, when someone faces a gray-area decision, their first instinct is more likely to be to ask for guidance, not to keep it quiet.



Disallowing shortcuts on standards and quality

Some moves don't involve judgment calls—they are simply off-limits. Training should communicate that cutting corners is not acceptable, even when it's faster or more convenient. The critical leadership challenge with "no turn on red" signs is consistency. Training here needs to reinforce zero tolerance for going against an organization's values or principles. This can help protect speak-up culture and deter coercive behavior that can erode trust.



Emphasizing values amid transformation

Perhaps more than any other moment, organizational values are put to the test during times of significant change, such as reorganizations or mergers and acquisitions (M&A). Rules may be unclear. Reporting lines may shift. People can be stressed, distracted, and uncertain. As rules get rewritten, employees rely less on process and more on judgment. This is when culture visibly asserts itself. Teams focused on targets and timelines are more likely to act with integrity and reflect what matters most to the organization if its values have been socialized and reinforced through learning initiatives. It is critical to communicate clearly—and show through actions—that although the terrain has changed, the values have not.



Promoting channels for discussing concerns

Organizations should use learning opportunities to reinforce their values and ensure that workers understand the multiple avenues available for raising ethical concerns or questions. It should be made clear and simple for anyone to make a report, and leaders can build trust in the reporting system by being approachable and delivering visible, responsive follow-through—which is central to the speak-up environment created through Ethics Empowerment.



Communicating alternate approaches

What if the typical route is blocked? Organizations benefit from ensuring that ethical considerations are prioritized as its employees navigate workflow disruptions. This can include education on escalation options, backup approval processes, and other methods that assist in protecting quality and trust. It becomes particularly relevant in moments requiring real-time response—service interruptions due to natural disasters or outages, or supply chain issues amid geopolitical volatility. Visible, viable detours show that the organization has thought through what to do when things get hard and has built the mechanisms to support it.



Acknowledging ambiguity and pressure

In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) business environment, conditions can change rapidly, creating new hazards. Learning programs should encourage slowing down, raising questions, or asking for help when conditions are risky and pressures mount (think market volatility or new regulations).

This can also promote active bystanding among peers. When all are attuned to a precarious situation, especially in a VUCA world, they can collaborate to modify their collective approach, boosting safety and success for all stakeholders.



Heightening standards in sensitive contexts

Certain situations or industries require specific, more modulated behavior, such as health care, AI implementation, banking, or any other scenario involving sensitive data and privacy. Learning should be tailored to those working in these areas, instilling specialized caution when warranted. Emerging technologies, such as generative AI, merit their own training, which may need to evolve quickly to keep up with the pace of change.



Assessing before proceeding with care

Many true ethical decisions require context. People need to know when to slow down to gather information, weigh competing obligations and varying outcomes, and then consult a trusted colleague or ethics resource before arriving at the best way forward. Learning initiatives should impart tactics for how to operate safely in moments of concern, such as when an employee suspects a colleague of cutting corners on a deliverable.



Considering the big picture and planning ahead

In an ethical culture, learning transcends the traditional training setting when ethical considerations are incorporated throughout project life cycles and strategies, from ideation and design to execution and implementation, and later in debriefs. When teams are instructed to examine the ethical impact of decisions at each stage—especially at junctions that require swift, critical decisions—this conditions people to look beyond an immediate situation and consider the broader picture of how choices can impact their personal reputation, as well as that of the organization.



Result: Integrity has the right-of-way

Even the best systems cannot prevent every collision, and potential hazards are everywhere. But whether on the roads or within an organization, safety is realized from making solid, ethical driving the default. A transportation system's goal involves creating a world that merges infrastructure and instinct, where stopping at a red light is so deeply ingrained that drivers hardly have to think about it. They just do it.

Beyond hosting occasional classes or posting signs about values, organizations realize an ethical culture through a sustained commitment to building systems and habits that support doing the right thing. Leadership's [tone at the top](#), amplified through continual ethics learning, can infuse integrity into decision-making and instills in everyone at the organization the idea of "This is how we drive here."

Working together, all of the Ethics Engagement signs and signals help set expectations and reinforce an ethical culture. Culture is the organization's infrastructure. It is a comprehensive roadway system accounting for risks, increasing trust, and helping to protect your people, your clients and customers, and the enterprise you are steering.

Endnotes

1. Ethics & Compliance Initiative, "[The State of Ethics & Compliance in the Workplace—United States Trends](#)," 2024, p. 11.
2. Deloitte Global, "[2026 Global Human Capital Trends](#)," 2026, p. 32.
3. Ibid, p. 35.
4. Ibid, p. 32.

Want to learn more?



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