

In Focus



Edgar Karssing, senior trainer and researcher at EIBE, the Institute for Responsible Business: "In 80 percent of all issues integrity codes are no help at all"

On September 1, Edgar Karssing (1969) received his PhD at Rotterdam's Erasmus University. His thesis addresses the thorny subject of integrity in professional practice.

On the agenda

The discussion about integrity in business has been raging for well over a decade. Put on the agenda by the then Dutch home affairs minister Ien Dales in the early 1990s and fuelled by recurring corporate scandals, integrity has become an issue that no self-respecting organization can ignore. In 1994 EIBE was founded at Nyenrode, and Edgar Karssing joined the institute the following year. Since then, he has given over 300 training courses to clients, ranging from civil servants to bankers and estate agents, in both the public and private sectors.

Three reasons

Asked why he chose integrity as the subject for his thesis, Karssing explains: "My interest was stimulated for three reasons. I wanted to address the confusion surrounding the concept of integrity; I wanted to study the emotional response in the discussion about it; and I wanted to examine the narrow way in which it was addressed."

Definition

For several years Karssing combined the responsibility for all training at EIBE with the work on his thesis. He soon realized that there is no all-purpose definition of integrity. "Everyone has his own definition. Usually it is too narrowly formulated, in terms of the fight against fraud and corruption. In my thesis I conclude that you shouldn't try to find a single definition. Integrity is used as the banner for a number of different issues. In simple terms, it is the professional responsibility to do what you have been hired to do, act in a moral way, resist temptation and be accountable for your actions."

Personal values

On closer inspection Karssing found that professional integrity is a lot more complex, because it touches on the essence of the human being - not just the employee. "There is also a personal dimension. Integrity is related to morality and self-respect - personal values that cannot be imposed by your boss. You have to find a balance between the interests of your work and your private life." He illustrates the point with the example of a manager who has confidentially been told during a management meeting that 20 people, including a friend, are to be fired. At lunchtime, the friend tells her that he has been offered a job and is wondering whether to accept it. If she reveals that his name is on the redundancy list she will not be professionally reliable, and yet it's natural to want to help a friend.

Codes and rules

In such situations of conflicting loyalties, the integrity codes and rules that have been introduced by many organizations are of little help. Karssing: "Often they're just pieces of paper for companies to base their policy on. Their use lies in giving employees a handle on what is and is not allowed, but the codes can address only a limited number of issues. I estimate that in 80 percent of all integrity-related issues they are no help at all. They can even create negative feelings and make people cynical, because they think management is just covering itself."

Below the belt

Too often, the emotional reaction to the introduction of codes and policies on professional integrity is not adequately dealt with. Employees frequently interpret such measures as below-the-belt attacks on their honor, pride and self-respect. Karssing quotes an example from his own experience: "A woman once told me she could not participate in a workshop because she saw it as an insult to her upbringing, in other words to her parents. Some people assume that these workshops automatically question their ethics. A reason for this is that in the media professional integrity is usually only mentioned in the context of a business scandal. Scandals and court cases make me realize how important my work is - but I don't need them to tell my story."

Criticism

Karssing concedes that there is some ground for the criticism voiced by professor Mark Bovens, who recently called integrity the most overrated theme in public governance. "It is sometimes seen as a new way to make money, and it also costs a lot and causes delays. My point is, however, that many organizations take the wrong approach. Rather than telling employees whether they may accept a few bottles of wine or a ticket to a football game, they should empathize with them and help them to solve their professional issues and dilemmas. There is too much one-way communication. The emphasis should be on employees' independence and credibility, and the possibilities for consultation on moral issues should be institutionalized."

Dual role

Edgar Karssing enjoys his dual role of trainer and researcher at EIBE: "Academically, my position at Nyenrode offers me plenty of room to move within my chosen context. My two roles here enhance each other. I enjoy the opportunity of learning from professional practice."

Integriteit in de Beroepspraktijk by Edgar Karssing can be ordered through the website of the publisher, Royal Van Gorcum: www.vangorcum.nl.