

A Canadian Association's Big Tent Approach to C&E

By Donna Boehme and Joe Murphy

In 1996, six ethics practitioners gathered in Toronto, Ontario, to discuss common issues and challenges arising in their individual roles in the emerging profession of corporate governance and ethics.

One of those original participants, Jane Garthson, recalls that the assembled group was “passionate about improving organizational ethics” and resolved at that first meeting to “raise the bar for ethics specialists scattered through Canada.”

Ultimately, the group formed the first national non-profit ethics practitioners organization in Canada, its name reflecting its bilingual English/French origins: the Ethics Practitioners' Association of Canada/Association des praticiens en éthique du Canada (EPAC).

Today that organization has grown to approximately 200 members and, according to EPAC's Chair, Norman Steinberg, those issues and challenges have increased exponentially in tandem with the growing complexity and changing demands of the profession.

Bringing together multiple sectors

EPAC describes itself as “the premier Canadian association of ethics practitioners in the private, public and voluntary sectors” with a vision to “enable individuals to work successfully in the field of ethics in organizations by enhancing the quality and availability of ethics advice and services across Canada.”

Steinberg believes that one of the organization's key strengths is its ability to “bring together ethics officers, consultants and educators who are commonly interested in the study, development and implementation of applied ethics concepts and practices.”

Thus, EPAC welcomes as members not only ethics practitioners, but also interested parties from the consulting, academic and public sectors of Canada.

“The founders recognized that there was a need to have a conversation to involve these three forces, to encourage corporations and individuals to act ethically, and there were senior individuals, in the government and at companies, who had to be in the tent,” says Steinberg. “In this way, the organization is different from some of its American counterparts who tend to have separate and distinct organizations for business (practitioners), academic and government ethics.”

Members and participants in EPAC programs include federal and provincial governmental agencies and departments, and universities and colleges.

'Net providers' and 'net buyers'

Steinberg acknowledges that the combination of “net providers” and “net buyers” of ethics advice within the same professional organization presents a few challenges, such as vendors soliciting business or otherwise promoting their products. EPAC addresses these with a strict member code of ethics. But Steinberg believes such challenges are more than outweighed by the opportunities to develop new insights and enrich the profession: “EPAC seeks to represent a microcosm for the larger compliance and ethics community.”

EPAC offers its members networking and roundtable events through its regional chapters, in addition to general website information, a member magazine and e-bulletin. And since 2001,

EPAC welcomes as members not only ethics practitioners, but also consultants, academics, and public sector employees.

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EPAC has maintained an innovative Competency Profile of Ethics Practitioners, designed to set a threshold standard for the ethics practitioner regarding the functions, knowledge and skills necessary to perform the role effectively. Members can use a companion self-assessment tool to evaluate themselves against the profile.

The changing ethics landscape

How have the needs of the association's members changed since 1996? Historically the organization's focus has been on Canadian-style values-driven ethics. However, with Canada's increasing emphasis on formal compliance programs, EPAC and its members have a great interest in reinforcing the links between the two regime styles. Following recent measures by the federal Canadian government that create additional layers of legal compliance and enforcement bodies in such areas as competition, health care, trade, privacy, antitrust/competition, environmental, financial, safety and security, EPAC's members have expressed interest in developing and successfully implementing programs responsive to these new requirements.

EPAC advises its members to combine a values-driven approach to encourage good behavior from employees, with the necessary compliance programs to prevent and detect wrongdoing. The compliance program should be fit-for-purpose and appropriate to the work of the organization. Only when the corporate culture affirmatively and visibly values good behavior, as well as consistently sanctioning bad behavior, can the organization successfully combat crime, misconduct and unethical behavior in a sustained manner.

EPAC believes that the industry's future growth will involve values-driven ethics programs as well as formal compliance programs. With legal compliance programs on a sharp increase in Canada, managers also realize that excessive rules and enforcement can be "demotivating" to employees. At the same time, values-driven ethics can motivate, but are not enough to prevent wrongdoing. The key is to meld these two approaches.

Steinberg cautions that it is a great temptation to set up "experts" on ethics in organizations, and leave difficult decisions to them. It is clear that any effective corporate program must be supported by strong leadership, experience and competencies. But at the same time ethical decision-making is the responsibility of every manager and employee in an organization.

What is needed is a greater number of full and part-time ethics practitioners who help staff to work through to ethical decisions in difficult cases and establish a healthy ethical culture, including appropriate compliance activities.

But what happens when those difficult cases lead inevitably to internal and political issues? Steinberg acknowledges that "there is little protection at present for ethics practitioners who feel obliged to contradict their bosses," and that those within organizations who "hold up the integrity lantern" are too often

rewarded with unhappy consequences with regard to their job security. For the practitioner to be able to deliver "fearless advice" (and ultimately, for the program to be effective), the issue of positioning, empowerment and protections for ethics practitioners must be addressed by boards, senior management, policy makers and ethics practitioners themselves.

Maintaining C&E as a priority

But perhaps the greatest challenge for ethics practitioners in Canada today is keeping senior management focused on ethics and compliance as a priority. "Many CEOs spend money on programs and want a hard return on their investment," says Stein-

Organization	Ethics Practitioners' Association of Canada / Association des praticiens en éthique du Canada (EPAC/APEC)
Country & origin	National non-profit in Canada since 1996
Number of members	Approximately 200
Membership profile	Corporations, private sector, academic, government, practitioners, consultants
Annual Dues	Range from CAD\$25 (student) to CAD\$150 (organizations)
Member Services	Website resource, regional meetings and roundtables, member magazine & eBulletin, Competency Profile and Self-Assessment
Website	www.epac-apec.ca
Contacts	Norman Steinberg, EPAC Chair: norman.steinberg@gmail.com and Cornelius von Baeyer, former EPAC Chair: vonbaeyer@cyberus.ca
<i>Ethikos is profiling efforts around the world to organize and support the compliance and ethics profession. We welcome suggestions on other organizations to include in this series.</i>	

berg, but at the end of the day, the program's success is "highly dependent on the personal values and commitment of the CEO who fundamentally is responsible for supporting, maintaining and reinforcing the values of the company." □

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