ETHICAL APPROACH TO DEALING WITH AMBITIOUS PEOPLE
By Shannon Warren
July, 2008

Ever have a co-worker or boss take the credit for your work? You're not alone. Taking undeserved bows is epidemic in this country. It was one of the top three ethical breaches revealed by the Ethics Resource Center's annual National Business Ethics Survey.

How do you deal with a credit-grabbing sneak at work? First, calm down. You don't want to come across as an anti-team egomaniac. I particularly liked the advice found on a website, Dr. K's Blog. The author suggested that you begin by privately approaching the person to ask a few in-depth questions. Explain, in the kindest and most polite manner possible, that you're confused about his exact contributions to the project. In other words, start out by giving that person the benefit of the doubt. After all, it's entirely possible that, in a rush to judgment, you may have overlooked your co-worker's valuable behind-the-scenes contribution.

If not satisfied with your coworker's responses, follow up with a couple of "drill down" questions – ones that get to the specifics. For example, in a non-accusatory tone, ask for clarification about the data or the basis for your colleague's recommendations. Even an overly ambitious jerk will probably want to avoid this gentle act of confrontation. Why? Because it could result in a humiliating exposure. Even if he doesn't come clean with you, I'm betting that he'll be more sensitive about his actions in the future. At the very least, perhaps the kudos-thieving rascal will be dissuaded enough by your inquiries to move to an easier target. Either way, you've done your job in holding another individual accountable for their actions, but have approached the challenging task in a gracious manner. Your conscience should be clear and, hopefully, your problem will disappear, too.

If you are a business leader, acting as a referee between status-seeking staff members can take its toll. The good news is that a lot of this workplace strife could easily be eliminated by introducing the simple concept of humility. (Now, there's a term you don't hear kicked around in business circles too often, is it?) Humility in the workplace is the ability to recognize and appreciate the contributions made by others. Managers can promote positive organizational behavior by encouraging workers to celebrate the achievements of their peers.

However, some managers feel that humility undermines a healthy sense of competition at work. If by that, they mean reinforcing cut-throat tactics to get ahead, then chances are pretty good that company is supporting a culture at high risk for ethical misconduct. The ERC survey indicated that in those organizations, employees are more likely to put their own personal interests ahead of the company's Further, abusive behavior abounds and lying occurs more often in those negative cultures. Not a pretty picture for fostering productivity, is it?

On the other hand, I was impressed last week by some Kimray employees who came to the OkEthics meeting. Guests seated at their table were not only treated to gracious hospitality, but also reported that they were inspired by the employees' acts of humility. People sincerely praised one another for efforts they had observed each other making at work. They took time to explain how those actions helped to accomplish tasks. No flattery. No personal horn-tooting. No showing off for the boss. Just simple gratitude toward one another and the humility to recognize that no single individual can achieve success on his own. That's how a positive work environment can and should be. Nice, huh?