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## strategy

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### Do the right thing

The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs asks basic questions that the rest of us sometime forget

We are a society with a split personality. Hooked on technology, we insist on speed. We want leaders who can make quick decisions and get instant results. In this climate, there is the ever-present temptation to take shortcuts, to serve expediency at the expense of doing the right thing.

At the same time, as survey after survey reveals, we distrust people in positions of authority. We don't give them time to think, and yet if they make one mistake, we withdraw our support. Interest groups, from national governments on down, have little tolerance for opposing views. Certainly our society pays little attention to anything that can't be simply stated in black and white. Ethics, for example—a field that calls for close attention to shades of grey.

The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs is a refreshing antidote to this limited mindset. It's housed in the former residence of the president of the Atlantic School of Theology, a secluded brick building that overlooks the Northwest Arm in Halifax. I went there to talk to the director, Frank Schwartz, a consultant on strategy and former partner at KPMG who was hired by the board in 2005. There's a view of a yacht club and another private club across the inlet; it was cool, and the fog was rolling in. It is a place made for contemplation.

Schwartz told me how the Centre was founded. One day in the summer of 2002, Colin Dodds, the president of Saint Mary's University, and Bill Close, then president of the Atlantic School of Theology, were at a golf tournament as part of a university meeting on Prince Edward Island. Since neither were golfers, they had time to talk. The conversation eventually drifted around to the subject of ethics and how it is one of the under-appreciated cornerstones of society. By the end of the discussion, the two men had agreed to found a new centre to explore this idea.

The result was the Atlantic Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs, a joint venture of the two institutions. In the beginning, it was mostly a board of directors from the university community with a simple mandate: to encourage dialogue on ethical issues. It was timely. "It hit a nerve," says Schwartz. "People listen when you talk about this subject."

In 2004 the centre made an impression when it invited Auditor General Sheila Fraser to make a presentation.

It was the early days of the sponsorship scandal. Instead of lambasting the federal government, Fraser argued that the system was working; that improprieties were being discovered and miscreants identified.

The centre hit its stride in 2005, when new directors came on board, more funding was acquired, staff was hired, and the name was changed to the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs. While Schwartz recognized the potential of the new centre, he wanted it to grow organically, even in creating its own identity. "One of my precepts when it comes to launching something new is, 'Don't rush to find out who you are,'" he says. "We have been trolling for like-minded people, and we have been catching a school."

An early priority was to draft the following vision statement: "CCEPA promotes the public good through the cultivation and dissemination of knowledge about ethical issues, to help generate new insights, provide greater awareness, and heal misunderstandings." The program was then defined to range over five areas: research, education, information brokering, consultation and training, and public discussion and awareness.

The centre relaunched quietly with several programs and a call for research proposals, resulting in two academic studies: one on the impact of civility training on the behaviour of high school students and the other on "greenwashing," the corporate practice of presenting a green agenda to the world that is more about public relations than real concern for the environment.

CCEPA uses its space as a resource centre that has been filled by groups such as the Nova Scotia Sea School, the Nova Scotia Environmental Network, and YMCA Youth Outreach. On the consultation side, Schwartz has been developing ethics programs for boards and planning groups and even a nursing home. The highlight so far has been a series of public debates on the role of trust in various sectors, including political leadership, media, and business. The debates have attracted leaders in their fields, people with strong opinions. Next up will be debates on the role of trust in science, the administration of justice, spiritual leadership, and academia.

While CCEPA has been evolving organically, the pace has been picking up. It has the potential to grow across the country, says Schwartz. At a recent speech hosted by CCEPA, Purdy Crawford, counsel to Osler, Hoskin and Harcourt LLP and former head of Imasco Limited, who hails from tiny Five Islands, N.S., weighed in on the role of ethics in the corporate world. "The fundamental starting point is to ensure a culture of integrity," he said. "This must start at the top, with a CEO who is accountable to an independent board that is well versed in the operations of the company."

Knowledge, responsibility, ethics—these are the foundation of any organization. Simple principles, but how often we forget them.