Ernst & Young CEO highlights importance of global ethics

February 25, 2013

In the wake of Enron and other corporate scandals, business schools across the nation have put a much greater emphasis on the teaching of ethics, but in a talk at the A. B. Freeman School of Business last Friday (Feb. 22), James S. Turley, chairman and CEO of Ernst & Young, said those efforts can only go so far.

“I’m not sure whether in a university you can teach ethics,” Turley told a packed audience in Dixon Hall on Tulane’s Uptown campus. “My guess is if someone doesn’t have it by the time they come here, it’s going to be really hard to convince them they should have it.



James S. Turley, center, chairman and CEO of Ernst & Young, discussed global ethics as featured speaker at the 20th annual Burkenroad Symposium.

“I *am* fairly convinced you can un-teach ethics,” he quickly added. “If you’re in an environment where someone comes in and they think, ‘I play by the rules,’ and they see everyone around them cheating, you can un-teach it pretty quickly.”

Turley discussed integrity, ethics and transparency in a global business environment as the featured speaker at the Burkenroad Institute’s 20th annual Symposium on Business and Society. Joining Turley for a wide-ranging conversation on business ethics were Adrienne Colella, director of the Burkenroad Institute; Daryl G. Byrd, president and CEO of Iberiabank; James M. Lapeyre Jr., president of Laitram; and Ira Solomon, dean of the Freeman School.

To help prevent the “un-teaching” of ethics, Turley said organizations must endeavor to create a culture of integrity from the top down, but just as importantly, those organizations need to put systems into place to ensure that their commitment to ethical conduct is being met on a daily basis.

“It’s not just training and culture,” Turley said. “It’s holding people accountable and doing so in ways that are measurable. It’s really important to hold business unit leaders and practice leaders accountable for an array of cultural [objectives], not just for revenue growth and profitability.”

In today’s business environment, with centers of economic power shifting to new countries and new cultures, Turley said it’s even more critical for companies to develop a global set of values and a global code of conduct.

“People coming out of universities today want to be in an organization that has strong standards and a clear sense of purpose,” said Turley. “If you do not have something that unites the many different cultures that are present in your workforce, you’re going to lose some of the best talent and you’re going to be at the scene of many more train wrecks than you’d like to be at the scene of.”

And while Turley may have some doubts about the ability to teach ethics in business school, he said there’s still much that universities can do to help prospective managers avoid unethical behavior.

“In any kind of ethics, fraud or corruption issue, there’s always a combination of pressure to do something wrong, opportunity to do something wrong and then the need to justify why you did something wrong,” Turley said. “I would encourage places like Tulane to continue to help people understand this intersection—the

triangle of pressure, opportunity and justification—because it’s real.”

The Burkenroad Symposium was just one of several events at the Freeman School that Turley participated in. He also attended a breakfast with faculty, alumni and local business leaders prior to the symposium, and he joined students for a luncheon workshop on business ethics immediately following the symposium.

“Jim Turley leads a huge global professional services organization and is one of the most astute leaders I know,” said Freeman School Dean Ira Solomon. “It was a very special honor to have him join us and share his experiences and expertise with our students and faculty.”

To see photos from the Burkenroad Institute’s 20th annual Symposium on Business and Society, visit the Freeman School’s Flickr site.