

## Regional Business Ethics Roundtables: The Greater Houston Experience

By Linda Lipps

*In 2006, the Greater Houston Business Ethics Roundtable (GHER) celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Because GHER is perhaps the best known regional business ethics group in the U.S., Ethikos asked one of its founders—Linda Lipps of Centerpoint Energy—to recount key points in its history and offer advice to those who might be considering developing similar organizations in their regions.*

The Greater Houston Business Ethics Roundtable has proven invaluable both to people entering the ethics profession and experienced ethics officers alike. It is difficult to imagine doing what we do without this benchmarking of opportunities and sharing within our immediate communities. Yet while GHER recently celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the organization had a rocky start. So my advice to you, readers, is this: don't get discouraged.

In 1989, Dr. Bette Ann Stead, Director of the Institute for Business, Ethics, and Public Issues at the C. T. Bauer College of Business, University of Houston, sent letters to Houston-area companies asking if they would be interested in forming a business ethics roundtable. The roundtable concept implied equality among all members involved in trying to share best practices.

No apparent interest was found. One executive stated, "Don't need any help and don't have time to spend talking." Another executive noted, "Management has placed great emphasis on imbuing a high ethical standard into the organization's culture." This company later saw a top executive sent to federal prison, and the company itself no longer exists.

### Changing times

Times were changing, however, and in 1991 the U. S. Sentencing Guidelines for Organizations were established, rewarding companies that got in trouble with reduced fines for maintaining effective ethics programs. In 1992, the Center for Business Ethics at Bentley College (Waltham, MA) founded the Ethics Officers Association (EOA). And in 1996, the Delaware Chancery Court warned corporate directors of personal liability.

In late 1995, Dr. Stead tried again. She sent out a concept statement for a business ethics roundtable and an invitation to a program on October 26, 1995. There were three corporate speakers describing their ethics programs and a handful of attendees. Dr. Stead asked that volunteers step forward to form a founding board. The founding board met on November 30, 1995. We were off and running.

While over the years GHER has grown and matured, our purpose and mission have remained constant. We provide a forum for the Houston business community to meet and discuss ethics and share best practices. One of the benefits to being an ethics officer (as *Ethikos* so widely promotes) is being part of a community that is so willing to share time and helpful information. Today GHER has over a hundred members. Our membership roster now includes some of the largest companies, universities and healthcare systems in Houston. We are a registered non-profit organization with a mission statement, by-laws, functioning board, policies, membership dues, and meeting fees. (Readers can view our membership information, including costs and structure levels on our web site, [www.ghber.org](http://www.ghber.org)).

In the beginning, we were perhaps too ambitious in hosting meetings on a monthly basis. For a number of years now, we have met on a quarterly basis—always first thing in the morning. This way, members can participate and still be back in their office by 10:00 or 10:30. Our

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meetings' locations, speakers and topics are announced at the beginning of each year, allowing members and non-members alike to schedule their resources and time. Among the most cost effective changes we made was to move from a hotel venue to a corporate setting. Today, members from throughout Houston host our meetings.

Without question, our success is directly linked to the continued support over the years by our members. We experienced growing pains like any fledgling organization. Before the Internet and email became the useful resources they are now, the board got together to fold, stuff and stamp envelopes for meeting announcements. Today, we have a web site maintained by one of our board members that offers helpful links to ethics resources, past and future GHBer events, contact information and even our meeting announcements.

In addition to the support of our members, GHBer has also enjoyed the support of individual experts and professional organizations like the Ethics and Compliance Officer Association (ECO). At each meeting a recognized guest speaker is brought in, either from within the ethics and compliance field or beyond.

Our first non-member speaker in 1996 was Carl Skooglund, who at the time was a vice president with Texas Instruments. Carl was thought of then, and is still referred to as, a pioneer in the ethics community.

Some of the other speakers who have graciously provided their time and expertise over the years have been Dr. Ed Petry, who at the time was Executive Director of EOA; Eugene Mensching, General Electric; Frank Daly (now retired) with Northrop Grumman; Perry Minnis, Alcoa; Jeff Kaplan, Kaplan & Walker; Dr. Michael Hoffman, Bentley College; Pat Gnazzo, Computer Associates; Dr. Craig Dreiling, Dreiford Group; Steve Priest, Ethical Leadership Group; Keith Darcy, Executive Director of

ECO; Win Swenson, Integrity Interactive; Pat Rogers (now retired) with the U.S. Olympic Committee. To each and every one, we say a heartfelt thank you.

Given the last few years of corporate demands and scrutiny to our member's programs, it was suggested that we bring in someone from the government. This reached beyond our immediate scope. We were thrilled that Mary Beth Buchanan, U.S. Attorney, immediately replied that she would be delighted to speak at our November 2007 meeting.

Importantly, the organization's expenses are more than covered by our dues and meeting fees. GHBer's policy is to reimburse our speakers for travel expenses only—one night's lodging and round trip, coach class—as well as other minimal related travel costs. One addition we've made to our program has been to implement a fifth meeting each year that is only available to members—at no charge. It is an all-day event hosted by a member company and covers more lengthy topics, such as how to conduct a risk assessment. Since I'm originally from south Louisiana, I refer to it as lagniappe—a little something extra.

Several years ago the GHBer board began awarding \$1,000 scholarships to MBA students at five Houston area universities. This year we increased each scholarship to \$1,500. Among the criteria: the student has demonstrated ethical leadership and has completed 15 hours toward an MBA degree. The winning student and their guests are invited to attend GHBer's last meeting of each year where they are acknowledged and thanked for helping to ensure that ethics is strong and alive in the workforces of tomorrow.

In conclusion, I strongly encourage readers to start a regional ethics group. It has been such a personally and professionally rewarding experience. My advice to those starting out would be to structure your organization from the beginning. Recruit a core group, set an agenda, advertise a program schedule, and implement an annual membership and meeting fee.

And one final thought, which is pervasive among all ethics officers: Don't hesitate to ask for help. Call me if you have any questions, or if I can help in any way. □