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Teaching the way to 'The Harder Right'

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MARIETTA - Retirement means different things to different people.

For retired FBI agent Oliver Halle, it means writing a book, conducting seminars on white-collar crime, providing training on justice issues in far-off lands and working as a private investigator.

Last year, Halle's investigative work included an audit of finances at Kell High School, which cost the school's principal and several coaches their jobs.

The east Cobb resident's upcoming book, "The Harder Right," is the essence of his seminars on the so-called white-collar crimes of fraud, embezzlement, bribery and related offenses.

It takes its title from the cadet prayer of the U.S. military Academy at West Point:

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Halle is well positioned to provide ethics training for corporations and government agencies using his "harder right" idea.

As an FBI agent for 28 years - the last 18 of them in Atlanta - Halle performed counterespionage work involving the former Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, pursued racketeering charges against Mafia bosses and then worked on corruption cases out of the FBI's Atlanta office.

His retirement in September 2003 led to his branching out into many different areas, but he is concentrating on white-collar crime, bringing ex-convicts with him to tell their stories about how bad decisions in business can destroy lives.

With the recent convictions of well-known businesspeople like Martha Stewart, former WorldCom CEO Bernard Ebbers and former Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski for investor fraud and insider trading, a cottage industry in ethics training has emerged.

Hale said it might appear as if corruption is the norm in the business world, where the only rule seems to be "don't get caught."

However, he said, many people who get involved in situations that lead to criminal behavior are good people who made bad decisions and took the "easier wrong." His seminars are not designed for those who would do anything to get ahead, but are instead for those who already "know right from wrong."

For example, he said, there might be a young lawyer from a good family who works his way into a "silk-stocking law firm," and gets married and has children. Maybe he buys a house and is on track to become a partner in the firm.

Halle said such a lawyer might be asked to bill for 2,300 hours a year, while he was previously billing for 1,800.

"He's a young lawyer, so he says he'll do his best," Halle said. "But six months later, there is no increase in his hours. One of the partners might bring that to his attention and say, 'We're not going to have this conversation again.'"

Halle said the hypothetical lawyer tries harder, but he can't get enough hours. At that point, he said, he's faced with a decision - either take the harder right and tell his boss the expectations are unreachable, or find a way to bill for those additional hours and hope he does not get caught.

"Taking the harder right can be brutally hard and often has severe consequences," Halle said, but in this case, the lawyer billed the additional hours and got caught by a sharp accountant. He loses his job, and will have a very hard time finding another one.

There are countless examples where the idea of the harder right comes into play, Halle said, such as the Monica Lewinski scandal that plagued President Bill Clinton when he denied his affair, ultimately leading to impeachment proceedings

"Had Bill Clinton taken the harder right (and admitted to it) - it would have been a footnote in history," Halle said.

From the crimes of billionaires like Ebbers to the working-class employee that steals from his boss, Halle said people are constantly presented with the dilemma of choosing the harder right or the easier wrong.

"The point we try to get across is that good people often find themselves in situations they never dreamed of," he said.

The issue is most obvious at the top of an organization, Halle said, where decisions by the leadership in a company, agency or other organization "set the tone" and filter down to the lower levels.

For example, he said, the cases of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq by U.S. soldiers was the result of commanding officers who set the tone and have not been held accountable. He said he finds it "unconscionable" that no officers have been charged in the abuse cases.

Halle, a Navy veteran, said he had high-quality commanders during his service, two of whom went on to become Admirals.

"I can assure you, if they were in charge, Abu Ghraib never would have happened," he said.

Despite the success of his "harder right" projects, Halle still finds time for private investigations and the occasional international journey to train justice officials in the former Soviet Union and in developing nations.

He started making the trips while still working for the FBI, and was accompanied by Cobb Superior Court Judge James Bodiford and

Assistant District Attorney Ann Harris on several of them.

His seminar program is designed for any organization, Halle said, and he has already presented it to insurance conventions and colleges, where business students are receiving more ethics training as a result of the recent high-profile cases.

As Halle states in the introduction to his program, "There will always be dishonest people, but it is possible to deter employees from misconduct and build a culture of honesty and integrity."

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