

BUSINESS Touchstone or Oxymoron? ETHICS

"Values" is one of the buzzwords we hear everywhere today. Family values. Traditional values. Alternative values. Along with a balanced budget, less government and more fiber in our diets, "values"—and their practical counterparts, "ethics"—are being promoted as one of the simple, obvious solutions to what ails us as a country and as individuals.

But critical readers and listeners will note that much of what is being said sheds more light on the 1996 elections than on questions of ethics and values—which does not mean that such questions aren't worthy of discussion. They are.

And perhaps the discussion takes on importance nowhere more than in the arena of business. When it comes to ethical questions, those of us in business find ourselves on the firing line every day.

Some would say that the very term business ethics is an oxymoron and that the discussion is pointless. They suggest that there is only one value in business, the bottom line, and one ethical criterion: What you do to get good numbers is good; what nets bad numbers is bad. Any other discussion is blowing smoke. And even if one is inclined to suggest otherwise, the brutal competition of today's business environment won't allow it. Nice guys finish last.

Others of us, including me, would like to argue that it is indeed possible, even necessary, to do well and do good at the same time. In the long run, the company whose products do what they promise, whose employees' words can be trusted, whose business dealings are above board and that treats both customers and employees fairly and with respect, will be the company that prospers.

Which side of the question do you come down on?

In 1994 the Ethics Resource Center, a non-profit educational organization in Washington, D. C., conducted a survey of some 4,000 individuals from a wide variety of businesses about their attitudes toward and knowledge of ethics and ethics programs at their companies.

The results of this survey are disturbing. In summary, those surveyed showed a good deal of uncertainty about their companies' attitudes toward ethics. In many cases, the perception was that when the choice was between doing what was right and making a profit, making a profit won out every

time. Even more disturbing was the fact that this choice was more common in the manufacturing sector than in any of the others surveyed, and that the people who most keenly felt the tension were front-line supervisors, technical and engineering staffs and quality control personnel. At the same time, many of the top management in these same companies perceived their companies as doing an excellent job of implementing good business ethics. (See our story on page 15).

We were so intrigued by this survey that we are taking a much smaller, non-scientific poll of a randomly selected group of our readers to see if we can determine whether what was true of manufacturing in general is also true of the gear business in particular. We will publish the results of our survey in the next issue.

But who cares?

We all should, because ethics are fundamental to doing business. There is no such thing as a value- or ethics-free workplace and, like it or not, almost every business decision has an ethical dimension. Saying that ethics has no place in your business in itself declares an ethical position.

One of the apparent results of the massive political change sweeping Washington is the beginning of a welcome reduction in the amount of government regulation of our businesses. If our leadership delivers as promised, then there will be fewer laws holding us to certain standards in our treatment of our workers, customers, stockholders, competitors and the world around us. We'll have to set our own, and what our ethics and values are will determine what those standards will be.

That raises some knotty issues. Is profit the ultimate good? Should businesses be held to a different standard than everyone else in the name of profit? Can we relegate "ethics" to a quality we want sports heroes, artists, welfare recipients and families to have, while we remain exempt in pursuit of the bottom line? Can we have a moral society driven by an amoral (or immoral) business engine? Is it even possible to have one set of values and ethics for our business lives and another for our private lives?

I think not, but that glib answer belies the difficulty of arriving at the conclusion. These are tough questions with no easy answers. They are, however, questions we have to start thinking about. We owe it to ourselves, our businesses and our communities.



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