

In Pursuit of Ethics -- Part I

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In Pursuit of Ethics: Tough Choices in the World of Work is the name of an easy to read book by O.C. Ferrell and Gareth Gardiner. It is about the powerful pressures in the working world and facing the tough choices. Without sermonizing or pushing a particular system of values, it helps you learn to think about ethical problems in a more insightful and interesting way than you ever thought possible, so you can make wiser choices for yourself.¹

"In Pursuit of Ethics" is also the name of this series of columns. It is hoped that this series will provide a focus for our profession as we pursue ethics in the 90s.

As things stand now, there is a gap in our profession between the law, academics, researchers, and the rest of us -- the doctors of chiropractic in practice.

I had several conversations with a teacher of ethics at a chiropractic college, what is being taught, and why. His philosophy is to teach the highest standards and to familiarize students with them. The standards are taught as principles, law, and concepts. Case studies concerning problems of ethics and fraud are not used. Such case studies, he argues, should not be used. These materials will expose techniques of unethical and fraudulent practice, and thus will teach many students how to be unethical. The puzzle is: How can we talk about ethics in a meaningful way without having the opposite effect we intend?

Talking about ethics in terms of principles and abstracts can make people feel alienated. The principle may be placed too high above the struggle to make a living. It's impossible to reach an unattainable principle. People may feel it's mostly irrelevant to practical life and being in practice.

If we're being sermonized, some get irritated. Sometimes, in response, we get spiteful and rebellious urges to make more mischief. We all have a personal history of being taught what's wrong and right, and ways we defend ourselves against that teaching. Our ethics are learned.

People don't think in high principles or abstract concepts. We learn to refrain from lying, cheating, and stealing. Put in terms we all understand; not lying, cheating or stealing is what ethics is all about. We don't need to use ten dollar words. Why do we use them? To cover up the behavior, to minimize the consequence, and confuse ourselves.

The authors of In Pursuit of Ethics report that research on ethical development has shown that people can raise their level of moral development throughout life, and ordinary people can improve the ethical decisions they make in organizations they work for.² They wrote: "Lying, cheating, and stealing seem to have become acceptable business practices. From the depths of this gloom, we share with you a sense of optimism about the future and reassure you that all is not lost. This difficult period is really a harbinger of better and more honest times ahead. We believe that the fundamental core value of honesty in our culture is alive and well, and that the years ahead will see a rebirth of higher ethical standards in every branch of government and business. It should be remembered that deeply troubled times are often the immediate precursor of the best of times, and

that better times do indeed lie ahead."³

They say that the road to recovery lies through a better understanding of the ethical decision-making process in the world of work. They offer insights and guidelines to improve our personal ethical decisions.

Every one of us is faced with tough decisions in business ethics. Let's discuss it. Let's learn how to make better choices. In this way there will be a rebirth of higher ethical standards throughout our profession.

This series of columns is to provide a forum for the profession for some frank, open talk. You are invited to tell us your stories. What's happened to you? What have you seen? What's the dilemma? What were the choices? What have you done? What are the ethical lapses that concern you? Write to us. Let's air these matters together.

References

1. Ferrell OC, Gardiner G: In Pursuit of Ethics: Tough Choices in the World of Work. Smith Collins Co., P.O. Box 20258, Springfield, IL 62708, Phone (800) 345-0096.
2. Ibid. pp 12
3. Ibid. pp 2

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SEPTEMBER 1992