

Business Ethics – Are our leaders all corrupt?

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As I look at the newspapers I see constant reminders that our leaders do not always make the best moral decisions. At the same time, it seems like none of these people ever seem to think they have done anything wrong. For instance, when you read about the trial of the leaders of Enron it seems like each person blames the other and had no knowledge that any wrongdoing was going on.

What is going on here? Are these people evil, greedy, or somehow just different from the rest of us? Perhaps, but I think that most people, including our leadership are basically decent people trying to do the right thing. So why does it seem that the newspapers are awash in stories about corruption. I think the main reason is that when people make mistakes, it's news. When they do the right thing it isn't.

So how do decent people end up making bad ethical decisions? And how do we prevent ourselves from making bad decisions ourselves? First of all, I think it is important to understand that a moral dilemma occurs when two competing ethical rules come into conflict with one another. For instance, many of us would steal to feed our families to prevent them from starving even though we know that stealing is wrong because the preservation of life, most of us would agree, is more important than not stealing.

I think we get into trouble when we do not take the time to regularly ask ourselves if our decisions are the right ones. If we decide that we are moral people who cannot make ethical errors, we risk making the biggest mistake of all. I believe that all of us have within us a criminal and a saint. Finding the saint consists of making time to be quiet and let our consciences speak to us. Then, of course, we have to have the courage to follow the dictates of our conscience. I must admit, that is not always easy to do.

While it is important as individuals to take time to assess our consciences, I believe that leaders have an additional moral responsibility. They have to build organizations that encourage open challenging of the leadership's decisions. If people do not feel safe telling the truth, then critical information needed to consistently make the right ethical decision is missing, and the organizations they are a part of are at risk. What I am saying is that we need each other's input to make the right decisions. I believe that if we approach ethical dilemmas with humility we will generally make the right decision.

So are all of our leaders corrupt? Do unethical people rise to the top? I don't think so. Perhaps, in those organizations where things go bad, the leaders did not take the time to ask about the morality of their actions, and no one had the courage to challenge the leadership. This thought makes me feel that all of us have a responsibility to help make our businesses more ethical, for as Gandhi once said, "We must become the change we wish to see in the world."