

Even Steinways Get Out of Tune:

Spirituality in Business

What's the difference between an ethical leader and a business leader? Are they mutually exclusive, a subset of each other, or one and the same?

Like the best Steinway can get out of tune, we humans can get slightly off kilter in small ways. The many decisions that lead to "right or wrong" are often more like shades of grey or unclear forks in the road. Ethics are fundamentally about a set of gradual and subtle decisions that lead to a larger impact.

What can people can put into place to make perhaps better decisions? We can move from being experts on facts and novices on values to experts on values, and students of fact.

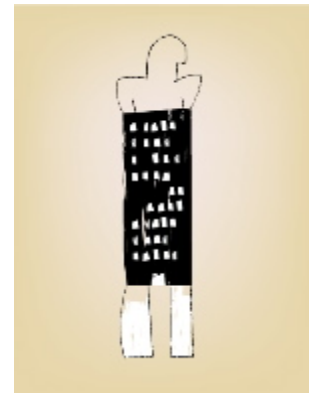
- **Is morality a sometime thing?**

The newspaper headlines are full of accounts of CEOs lining their pockets, making decisions that are not transparent, and outright lying. These are not some no-name, aggressive companies on their way up, but leaders of notable companies that have held strong brands for years: HP's Patricia Dunn, über-attorney Larry Sonsini, Greg Reyes of Broadcom, and Jeffrey Skilling of Enron.

Could this be proof that even those at the top can lose their way? While I would argue this is true, it is not that they as people are bad, but that they made some bad decisions. Bad decisions that any of us could make, unless we build a system around us to prevent this. And even then, we'll likely still make some bad decisions, but maybe we'll learn from those as well.

- **Where does morality come from?**

Morality, ethics, and spirituality in business are funky topics in today's 21st century results-oriented business culture. My own story of why I care about this topic is, of course, personal. I am loath to suggest I "know" ethics as much I say I admire certain things and wish to integrate them into everything I do so that they feed what I do and how I do it. I got into a huge brou-ha-ha back at Autodesk where I chose a series of decisions that ultimately cost me a friendship of a long-time girlfriend. I didn't intend to go down that path, to lose sight of personal values of respect or to terminate relationships for the expense of business decisions. But at that time I didn't have a framework for what to consider and what choices were available to me.



- **A framework for morality and ethics in business today**

Okay, aren't all business school people trained to come up with frameworks for business concepts, so why not about morality? Here is mine that I've adapted from a combination of some older books as well as Harvey Fox's book on business and spirituality and a course he taught at Harvard.

- Recognize: We must have the ability to recognize an issue as a moral issue
- Options: We need to frame “what should I do” choices
- Filter: We need to have a filter mechanism designed to sort options
- Courage: And then we need to have the moral courage to act a way we see as “right.”

◦ **Recognize issues as moral**

When is something a moral issue? If you were Patricia Dunn and you had a leak on the board, would you view that as a moral issue, an investment decision, a process issue or a political issue? Maybe the issue at hand was all four. But the question is whether we look at what we are doing not only for the immediate impact, but also look to understand or intuit what it could be. While many decisions we make in the workplace are binary yes/no decisions, some have more long-lasting implications. Especially when people are at odds with one another, there is almost always a moral question. The question might be which division to shut down, how to “downsize” a team, whom to promote to lead a new initiative, or what the compensation plan will reward. Each and every one of these embed a moral question.

◦ **Framing “What should I do” choices**

A good friend of mine, Marc McGee, said “About all things, ask yourself ‘Who do you want to be?’ and that will tell you what you do.” This concept is one that assumes we have some experience of morality in our life and the ability to draw out right from wrong within us. The notion of looking in versus looking out seemed like such a foreign concept to me at the time—as if I had the time or inclination for that kind of relentless self-examination. But Marc was right then, and he is right now.

Many times, things come down to “pro and con” lists. You make two columns, write all the factors in favor in one column, and then all the negative factors in the other column, and then use this to trigger a decision. I can remember doing this before business school, and I find that more education only taught me more ways to build a spreadsheet of options.

Now, let’s look at what happens when you live within this type of binary thinking, and then what happens when you open the aperture and look at more options. To see or feel a moral question sometimes requires you to step outside one’s own point of view, to see that of other classes, eras, genders and ages. Human beings are often dissatisfied without “an” answer so we often yearn to limit options. Yet if age teaches us anything, it’s that life is full of unsatisfying and incomplete stories.

The full implications of things considered are rarely as simple as pros and cons, but more about “What road does this put me on?” When we’re in the middle of a situation, it is tougher to access options. The missing dimension in nearly all moral reflection is imagination. We need to reach beyond what we see, to what could happen when we follow a path. I could use Dunn’s example today because it is easy to see that when she chose to enable pre-texting of the board, employees, and journalists, she gave a green light to violate privacy and show a distrust to all concerned. Did she think that through, I wonder? Because the decision (to me, at least) was not about whether to pretext—which on its surface looked like a viable option. Rather, whether to go behind someone’s back to spy on them. It might have been different if Dunn’s decision process had examined the options and imagined what other choices were available to her. Perhaps there could have been a dramatic moment in the board room, or hiring an expert in challenging conversations, or perhaps calling in the police so the issue became public and the leaker found through public intervention. But the decision was to keep the issue “private” so

many of those options weren't pursued. The decision was to not enable a direct conversation with the organization, to talk about things openly and publicly.

It seems to say that if one is lying, we'll do something of similar value to find out. If she did ask herself "who do you want to be," I'd like to believe that any of us who do ask ourselves those questions would slow down enough to consider and think of the moral choices as not "out there" but "in here." Did she want to be someone who enabled spying? Did she want to violate the privacy of her peers? Did she want to take a topic under the table rather than put it on the table? And did she choose that amongst ALL the choices that were available?

- **Filter mechanisms to sort options:**

I've often wondered if there is such a thing as a regret-free decision, where we could neither hurt nor displease anyone. I'm not convinced there is. Because all of life is choices. When I deeply hurt my friend, I was choosing to "win" on a business topic that I thought meant the efficiency and value of dollars spent. I was using my full mind, and so I wondered why it was not coming together. "Why the tension," I remember thinking. I'll never really understand all the ways I made mistakes in that situation. Yet now, I see that arguments represent an opportunity to see things anew. When we enter the world of the people we meet, we engage them not in arguments, but in conversation and stories. And if we listen enough and imagine a bigger picture, then we can usually create a universe that is inclusive. Not one that causes one to win and one to lose. But to create alternative possibilities to see beyond what sometimes appears to be an impasse.

- **Courage to act as we see right:**

If you look at history, you can see that Martin Luther King, while admired today, was vilified in his time as being unpopular to some of his race, opposed by many in politics of that date and even ridiculed for having a dream of racial equity. Such was the case with Gandhi or Lincoln or so many other leaders. They had the fortitude and courage to act on their beliefs. But none of them did it alone. They had friends. They had people who believed in their vision as much as them.

This only reinforces to me that living a moral life is not a solo life. Your friends help you handle and evaluate options and find the courage to act. I can remember early on when I was trying to "change my ways" after I had ruined my relationship with this friend, I had a new type of interaction. This time it was with someone I thought was treating me wrong. And I wanted to argue and make demands. But I decided that was not who I wanted to be.

A little group I was seeing regularly listened while I vented, teased me about going soft, but told me that I was doing the right thing. I felt both weak and walked upon. Yet, I was committed to trying and learning a new way of engaging that involved seeing the best in people and giving them room to act well towards me. Not because I demanded it, but because they wanted to. I was sure in my mind that I would "lose" and I was delighted to find I not only got what I wanted but more than what I wanted.

I'm not trying to say it will do that all the time, because really what I'm trying to say is the outcome isn't always the point. The outcome is to get clear about who you are, and who you want to be so you can live in the world—and live with yourself. I have come to define ethics as that which allows the broader interest of people and organizations to serve above their own needs. It takes great courage to do that.

I saw Carly Fiorina recently at the Churchill Club and I've been wondering ever since what would have happened if she had challenged the board to get honest with one another. Maybe she didn't because she thought they weren't ready, or she couldn't influence that kind of change. If she had, she might still have lost her job, who knows. But maybe she could have prevented another two years of board leadership dysfunction.

◦ **Some final thoughts**

Morality and ethics in business are not often reinforced actively in our culture. And it's not as simple as a list to follow per se. It's a way of living and being—of staying in tune with our inner voice and what matters. Each of us can develop some muscles of perspective that will help us live out ethical values. For those of us that want more guidance, we can join a community that helps us define, learn and live out values.

Why should we care? I started this rather long epic on whether ethical and business people were the same? The underlying word is people. Because it is not organizations that make decisions, it is people and when each of us and all of us collectively make any of our decisions while being more morally centered, then we will in effect enable a better culture, organization and perhaps even, a better world.

I believe business can be transformed from a place where CEOs line their pockets, and lying is discovered in the boardroom based on how we work, how we engage with one another. We can move from being experts on facts to experts on treating each other with the humanity that we need. Starting with understanding what decisions are moral issues, to defining "what should I do," to filtering mechanisms and sorting differently and having the inner fiber to act as we see right.

I wish I could end this with some report or statistic that says, if we live morally, business performance will rise by some defined growth x%. But I have faith that when we feed the roots of our business tree with good ethics, the tree will yield good outcomes. I hope you have faith too.

◦ **Additional Resources**

- ***Spirit In Business*** [<http://www.spiritinbusiness.org/new/content/home.php>]
Some things are more important than other things. This site focuses on ways to bring your true "self" into your world, and does it in a non-squishy way. Impressive
- ***Spirituality in Business*** [<http://www.communityofjoseph.com/>]
Andre Delbecq, Chair of Management Sciences at Santa Clara University, and former Dean of the Business Department, is a well-known speaker, author and teacher. He's an inspiration to me for many reasons but namely for using his learned wisdom and personal insight to enable the "spirituality" word to be okay in business today. He, along with others, leads a weekly session of contemplative prayer and reflection with CEOs and Silicon Valley business people. Their website contains a number of good inspiration readings.

This white paper is based on a presentation by Nilofer Merchant to the national Women in Technology conference on the topic of Spirit in Business.