

A Paradigm for Business Decisions:

By Richard A. Jenkins

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Every day we hear or say that this was good or that was bad. For example, most reactions to the Enron scandal did not praise those who made money but to say they did it the wrong way. Martha Stewart' stock did not drop because she was convicted of a crime. She hasn't been. Her brand has been tarnished by the perception that she had done something wrong. Society punished these businesses in part by taking away money and/or opportunities. On the other hand, businesses and people who do right are often rewarded with success and profits. This reality creates a practical motive to do right, even if one does not have a personal one. The difficult question is: "How to decide what's right and what's wrong?"

Most people believe that there are universal, unchanging standards of right and wrong. They may base these on religion, natural law or the survival of the species. Since they cannot be easily dissuaded from such values, the business world must respect their sense of right and wrong. To fail to do so, even when a businessperson does not share those values, can hurt a business economically. For example, an organization called Focus on the Family believes pornography is wrong. Therefore, it's website condemns AT&T and MCI profiting from calls made to phone sex providers. Such sites often call for boycotts of the company or companies involved. Similarly, the popular condemnation of Adelphia executives is based the belief, held by societies for thousands of years, that stealing is wrong.

Each society has its own values in addition to virtually universal standards. Societal values change; things that were not condemned in the past now are. For example, most Americans now consider certain words and comments wrong that were once the source of amusement. This sense of right and wrong is often expressed in the courts. Businesses have paid dearly for what their employees have said, much less done. Texaco's \$176 million settlement, as well as the multi-million dollar judgments against Kroger and Wal-Mart, were based in large part on comments made by employees, sometimes in the privacy of an office. Failing to follow societies rules about right and wrong can have devastating economic effects.

Individuals typically accept universal and cultural values. They also have their own private sense of what is right and wrong as well. For example, some people are vegetarians. It would be bad business to serve them meat and perhaps even to eat meat while with them. Others are offended by drinking alcoholic beverages. To invite such a persons to a reception where alcohol flows freely and all the food contains meat or meat products may offend them and encourage them to leave quickly. With them go not only their business, but also all the business they might have referred.

Another source for determining right and wrong is personal advantage. When neither religion,

society, nor the personal values of those involved is offended, decisions can and should be made on the basis of profit. That is after all what business is all about. But whose profit should be considered? Customers and clients want to profit from a business relationship as much as the vendor does. This means that consumer benefits should be a reality, not just advertising. Relationships that are not to everyone's advantage may be wrong.

Decisions about right and wrong are made in the business community every day. These decisions should be made thoughtfully. They should consider universal values, society's mores, and the convictions of those involved as well as personal advantage. Decisions about right and wrong are not just ethical matters; they may have an impact on the bottom line. All that is left is to do the right thing.

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