



MUST READ: THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS "BUSINESS" ETHICS

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In this crazy world of a corporate board chair investigating board members, a member of the House of Representatives accused of inappropriately contacting Congressional pages, and employees embezzling from their organizations, one has to wonder whatever happened to business ethics. The scandals of the last decade and beyond have generated significant discussion and books on the subject of business ethics. A search on Amazon.com for "business ethics" generates a list of 11,300 books but despite the number of books written, corporate ethics policies implemented or ethics trainings held, the ethics crisis seems to persist. One book in particular addresses this dilemma simply.



The nonprofit sector is especially subject to scrutiny due to its charitable purpose and need for the public's trust. However this sector has also be rocked by scandals and inquiries from the Senate Finance Committee and various state attorneys general. The sector's response has been to establish various standards and accountability programs such as the *Standards for Excellence* program from the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations, Wise Giving from the Better Business Bureau and others. However these programs beg the question of what causes organizations to behave unethically.

It is not the nonprofits that act unethically but the people running and working for these organizations. Ethics is a personal issue not a corporate one. No corporate ethics program can make a person (employee, volunteer or board member) act appropriately, it is a personal responsibility. John C. Maxwell explains this concept in his book, *There's No Such Thing as "Business" Ethics: There's Only One Rule for Making Decisions* (Warner Business Books, 2003, ISBN 0-446-53229-0).

In the Preface, Mr. Maxwell recounts the suggestion of Laurence J. Kirschbaum, chairman and CEO of the AOL Time Warner Book Group, to write a book on business ethics. He responded "There's no such thing as business

ethics – there’s only ethics. People try to use one set of ethics for their professional life, another for their spiritual life, and still another at home with their family. That gets them into trouble. Ethics is ethics. If you desire to be ethical, you live it by one standard across the board.” John Maxwell spends the next 134 pages explaining how living by the Golden Rule is all you need to live ethically.

To Maxwell, an ethical dilemma is “an undesirable or unpleasant choice relating to a moral principle or practice” (p. 5). People usually decide to do (1) what’s most convenient, (2) what we must do to win, or (3) by rationalizing our choices with relativism (different standard for each situation). However, Maxwell believes that one guideline can be used to govern all ethical decision making — “How would I like to be treated in this situation?”

Variations of the Golden Rule exist in almost every culture and religion including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Confucianism to name a few. Therefore there is a universality of the Golden Rule that crosses most cultural, geographic and religious boundaries. However, Maxwell also recognizes that it is not easy to live by the Golden Rule, we all face many temptations and traps to trip us up. However, “There are really only two important points when it comes to ethics. The first is a standard to follow. The second is the will to follow it.” (p. 23)

John C. Maxwell offers a roadmap to living the ethical life while appreciating how difficult it is to do. His chapters lead you through the process including discussion questions at the end of each chapter. You can read the book independently or form a book group to discuss the lessons to be learned. In Chapter 4, “Living a 24-Karat-Gold Life,” Maxwell offers four suggestions for achieving your goal. First, adopt the Golden Rule as the integrity guideline for your life then make your decisions based upon this integrity guideline. Third, manage your decisions based on this integrity guideline and last ask others to hold you accountable for your actions — “nothing helps to keep a person honest like accountability.” (p.64)

The challenge for the nonprofit sector is how to encourage its people to act ethically — senior management and leadership must provide a good role model. If senior leadership does not “walk the talk” then how can you expect others to follow? So in all of your decisions ask yourself “how would I like to be treated in this situation?” before acting. John Maxwell’s book is a must read for all nonprofit executives. It is a quick and easy-to-read book with lots of practical and useful information. Enjoy!

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