Bridging the Gap
Between the Is and the Ought

BY MICHAEL JOSEPHSON

During a workshop for high-level executives, it became clear that there was widespread dissatisfaction about the ethical state of their industry. The participants wanted everyone to live up to higher standards. That is, until we got down to specific situations where scrupulous truth-telling, promise-keeping, and good-faith compliance would require changes that could negatively affect the bottom line or become competitive disadvantages.

It seems that everyone is for ethics in the abstract.

It's not uncommon to hear someone condemn situational ethics and moral relativism one moment, only to defend some deceptive, misleading or otherwise improper professional practice the next. Most people want to do their jobs with complete integrity but, despite popular rhetoric that good ethics is good business, many don't seem to believe it. Or they're just not willing to pay the cost.

Let's face it. Ethics can be quite constraining, especially in a business context. Consequently, lofty ideas about morality and virtue often give way to more pragmatic standards of decision making, involving factors such as what it takes to win, what our competitors are doing, and what we're likely to get away with. "Do what's right" becomes "Do what works."

The hard thing is to live up to our moral aspirations when there is a wide gap between the "is"—what people are actually doing—and the "ought"—what people should be doing based on moral principles. People of character know that ethics is not about the way things are. It's about the way they ought to be.

Ethical standards are prescriptive, not descriptive. They tell us how we should behave. And they're not merely suggestions. They're ground rules.

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