

No Such Thing as Business Ethics

BY MICHAEL JOSEPHSON

During a workshop for a Fortune 100 company, I made what I thought was an uncontroversial point that beyond a legal obligation to keep promises and honor contracts, there is an ethical duty; it's a part of being trustworthy. A senior executive objected strenuously.

"Whether the company wants to live up to its commitments is a business decision, not an ethical one," he said. In fact, he said, the company had a responsibility to evaluate whether it was in its best interests to honor or breach contracts, and the decision should be based on a simple cost/benefit analysis. Ethics was not an issue.

Under this theory, whatever works is right. It makes the pursuit of self-interest the proper standard for business judg-

ments. This theory of "business ethics" flourishes because many people compartmentalize their lives into personal and business domains, assuming each is governed by different standards of ethics. In business, the argument goes, ethical principles like trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship are simply factors to be taken into account. They're not moral obligations.

As a result, fundamentally good people, who would never lie, cheat or break a promise in their personal lives, delude themselves into thinking that they can properly do so in business. This rationale is fatally flawed.

Ethics is not concerned with descriptions of the way things are but prescriptions of the way they ought to be. Though we may face different sorts of ethical challenges at work, the standards do not change when we enter the workplace. There is no such thing as "business ethics" – there is only ethics.

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