

## Ethics & Football: Pro-active or Reactive

by David W. Gill

It's football season again. Fans (derived, appropriately enough, from the word "fanatic") from Cal Berkeley (my boys) to BYU to Ohio State to Florida are rooting for victory.

One thing that successful football teams do is study their upcoming opponents. For example, anyone playing the Cal Bears this season will watch a lot of film of Cal's previous games. In particular, they will watch Cal star DeSean Jackson and try to figure out how to stop him from running back any kicks for touchdowns. Many of Cal's opponents just kick the ball out of bounds to keep Jackson from hurting them with a big return. All good teams study the potential problems their upcoming opponents may create for them---and try to figure out how to respond effectively, containing or neutralizing those threats.

Dealing with the problems that are likely to arise is an essential part of good football. However, if that's all a team does to prepare for a game, they are not going to win. Great teams don't just figure out how to respond to their opponents' threats, they figure out how to use their own strengths to actually dictate the action on the field. Winning teams are proactive, not just reactive.

This football lesson has an exact parallel in organizational ethics. If ethics is only thought of as a response to problems and threats that arise (e.g., a lawsuit, a brand-tarnishing scandal), something important is missing. If the ethics team is just an emergency crew rushing to help out in times of crisis, the bleeding may be limited but the accidents themselves will not be prevented. Unfortunately, that's the way ethics is viewed in many organizations (and many MBA programs). It goes like this: Inappropriate flirting or touching . . . whistle blowing and a big lawsuit looming . . . hey, let's have some mandatory sexual harassment training to define clear boundaries that must not be crossed. Reactive, negative, narrow damage-control. OK, it must be done but what a waste if that's all we do.

How did we get to this point in our approach to ethics? In broad strokes, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century "Enlightenment" pushed moral philosophy (in imitation of the natural sciences) toward a search for scientific, universal, rational, abstract moral laws independent of specific human communities with their particular purposes, feelings, traditions, and cultures. Ethics was reshaped in the image of the laws of physics, chemistry, and mathematics. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, this experiment we call "Modernity" came to be widely viewed as a failure and even an impossibility. Real people don't live by "categorical imperatives" but rather by guidelines embedded in communities and serving particular (not universal) human purposes.

Thus was "postmodern" ethics born. Unable to agree on universal moral laws, and surrounded by a growing cultural and linguistic diversity on our crowded planet, the ethical focus moved more and more to particular cases and dilemmas. We don't have the same religious, philosophical, or cultural backgrounds. We are unable to agree on any universal moral laws . . . but we do share this or that specific problem staring us in the face. In the end, ethics became a defense mechanism, a strategy of damage control for those confronting hard cases.<sup>1</sup>

There is a better way in business ethics. I call it "mission-control" ethics. What this means is that our *ethical motivation* (the reasons we try to do the right thing) and our *ethical guidelines* themselves (our values and principles, our code) grow directly out of our shared *mission and purpose* (the reason we work together rather than going solo). Our values and principles are the guidelines that help us get to where we want to go as a team.

Think back to that football team. Its plays are not designed to be universal, rational, and theoretically elegant. Its training and physical conditioning regimen is not some abstract ideal. No, all of it is directly linked to the purpose of scoring touchdowns, winning games and championships. That's what motivates the players to work out and to run the plays as well as possible. That's how the plays are designed in the first place. They are responses to the question: what will get us into the end zone, and win this game?

Plato and Aristotle thought about ethics this same way: self-control, courage, wisdom, and justice are the four cardinal moral virtues *because* they are the characteristics that enable us to achieve our purpose and be happy. "Sharpness" is the leading virtue of a knife---because the purpose of a knife is to cut things. The Ten Commandments (ostensibly the moral guidelines for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike) also have this structure. The second through tenth commands (honor parents, no murder, theft, false witness, etc.) are corollaries and implications of the first commandment about who's going to be god here. Our gods determine our "goods" in this sense.

Thus, the most important step toward a sound ethics in an organization is to get clear about a mission that is inspiring and unifying. James Collins and Jerry Porras's justly famous study of leading businesses, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (HarperBusiness, 1994) and, more recently, Nikos Mourkogiannis's *Purpose: the Starting Point of Great Companies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), muster overwhelming evidence that purpose, mission, and vision are integral to the sustainability, success, and excellence of business organizations.

My argument takes it one step further and asserts that ethics---doing the right thing---is as intimately linked to purpose, mission, and vision as business success and excellence. But why should that surprise us? For Plato, Aristotle, and the classical Greeks, *arête* was the term for *both* moral virtue and excellence. Ethics is inextricable from excellence. Ethics is about excellence---not just about jail avoidance.

The marketplace is an imperfect, unpredictable, sometimes cruel place. We can never promise that good ethics will always result in profitable businesses and successful careers. Sometimes, in fact, choosing to do the right thing may *cost* our business and our career a significant price. The great thinkers and leaders (including those who suffered greatly) throughout the generations have always argued that it is preferable to live a life of integrity and pride, even if it means suffering, rather than living a life as a weak, moral sell-out (even if selling out saves us some pain and results in some short-term gain).

But suffering and defeat are the exceptions. *Normally*, most of the time, in most contexts, sound ethics is an integral component in successful, excellent companies and careers. Treating people and nature *right* usually pays off in terms of excellence: fulfilling our mission and achieving our vision. Great business leaders learn how to preach persuasively as well as practice consistently the ethics/excellence message in their companies.

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<sup>1</sup> The great historian and analyst of this history of ethics is Alasdair MacIntyre. See his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1984) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).