

Ethics in Business – The Code of the Modern Warrior

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A great deal of time, effort, and money is spent every year in corporate America trying to determine proper ethical behavior for companies and individuals. Centers for Corporate Ethics have sprung up at several universities, and consulting companies have started up significant practices regarding the subject.

I believe that there is another way to discuss ethics and the “right behavior” in our workplace and our society. I propose to discuss an alternate way to view the ethics of our behavior. I will articulate my alternative view using the ancient Japanese perspective of honor and how it affects the role of the current day warrior, the business professional.

What is Ethics?

I have been working in industry and consulting for over 30 years. My experiences have been with some organizations more or less ethical than others. But what is ethics? At a presentation at the American Society for Quality (ASQ) Annual Quality Congress, I heard it defined as a broad, undulating chalk line and the shoes of many have chalk dust on them. More specifically, ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos* meaning character. It describes who we are at some deep fundamental point but more than that, it should also help guide the decisions we make. Some term this deep fundamental element the moral character of the person. Again, we fall back to the English word, character. Perhaps a better word to use to describe the right actions of people is honor. An action is honorable or an individual is honorable or acts honorably.

Whether an individual acts honorably is a function of deeply held fibers that are learned from experience and can be taught. Since they can be taught, they can be mis-taught.

In the history of civilization through out the world, there have been several codes of honor that stand out. Two notable examples existed at about the same time. In Europe, the code of honor was the code of the warrior – the knights of old. Referred to as the Code of Chivalry, the knight’s code was well defined and documented. It was passed down from knight to squire. Feudal Japan had its warrior code, the second example. It is referred to as the Code of the Samurai or the Warrior’s Code – Bushido! Most of what we will discuss in this paper is drawn from experience with the teachings of Bushido, The Way of the Warrior is still practiced in feudal Japan and taught today in some of the better martial arts schools throughout the world. Bushido was originally a code for the warrior similar to the Code of Chivalry in feudal Europe. I find it provides some great insights into today’s warriors in business.

Mine honour is my life; both grow in one; Take honour from me, and my life is done.
Richard II, Shakespeare

The Basic Tenets of Honor

Honor is a term that many people use but few understand. Most people can describe an act where one has performed honorably but few can actually define it. Many will equate honor with honesty. If you pay your bills and settle your debts, you are honorable. Still others will equate it with stature within ones corner of society. If my peers respect me, then I am an honorable man.

While honesty, respect of your peers and truthfulness are all acts of honorable people, they do not define honor. The honor code of our military academies has one clear and simple definition of what honorable people don't do: "We do not lie, steal, or cheat or tolerate anyone among us who does." By point of clarification, if we say something that is misleading or not completely correct, either through our own volunteering or in response to a question, that is lying. If we choose to let someone believe that which we know to be false, that is also lying. Honor itself, as taught by Bushido, is founded on three tenets:

- Obligation
- Justice
- Courage

Obligation

Obligation is at the root of all honor. Meeting our obligations, as long as they are just, is principally what makes us honorable. These obligations are financial and work related, obviously, but they are far more subtle than that, and clear. We all rely on others, in our work and in society. We do not exist as islands we must interact with each other. When someone helps us, does us a favor, we acquire a social and moral obligation to repay that person. This is duty.

Most people believe that they should repay favors but truly honorable people are particularly mindful of repaying them without exacting a price and recognizing their obligations. If we repay such an obligation but make such an issue of the repayment, then we have exacted a measure for that repayment and that is dishonorable. Among the ancient warrior societies, the Japanese were the most diligent. In Japanese, a word closely associated with honor is *giri*. Translated, this word means "right reason." On the surface it means "duty", but actually, it means a great deal more. *Giri* is the moral obligation to fulfill one's duty. It presumes a basic social system of debt and repayment.

Whenever someone does something for us, we assume an obligation to repay him. We carry this obligation as a burden until we relieve ourselves of it by repaying the debt in a way commensurate with what they did for us. The Japanese would say you carry his *on* (pronounced own). Fulfilling that obligation is *giri*.

While it has different names in different cultures, *giri* plays a crucial role in an honorable society. In military society, as well as business, capable leaders train, support,

and look after their subordinates. In return, dutiful subordinates are obligated to support, protect, and perform for their leaders. Honorable warriors look out for one another. Each covers his comrade's back and, in return, knows his back is covered if his compatriot is honorable. We are, therefore, all honor bound to defend and support our leaders and the countries that provide us shelter and the organizations that provide us employment and stability. But this obligation is not a blind or ignorant one. As we will see in the discussion ahead, that obligation must be carefully selected and may be breached when specific conditions exist.

There is an obligation hierarchy for the honorable person. That hierarchy in order of descending importance is obligation to family, employer, and country. Notice that obligation to self is not mentioned and would come a distant fourth in this discussion. The purpose of the hierarchy is to understand the order in which to judge our obligation.

Our first obligation is to protect and provide for our family. This is usually pretty clear for people – we protect our loved ones. But it reaches farther than that. If we feel we have been slighted by our supervisor and march into their office to give them a piece of our minds, it might provide short term gratification, but it is dishonorable if it puts our job and, therefore, our ability to provide for our families at risk.

Our second obligation is to our employer. Assuming the needs of our employer are just and honorable, we have an obligation to support and meet our employer's performance expectations. This includes loyalty to that employer.

Our third obligation is to our country. This obligation includes the responsibilities of citizenship. We are obliged to elect a government, tell it when it is performing dishonorably, and support it financially and in all other ways provided by just laws.

Honor is essential to professionals. Honorable leaders have a right to know the truth and be able to trust those whom they lead. They must be able to trust those in their charge to provide the most accurate information, no matter how bad the news. They deserve unfailing loyalty. Without the proper information, leaders cannot make the proper adjustments for the improvement of the organization. A warrior who fails to provide this level of truth and loyalty fails himself and his organization.

Similarly, leaders have a responsibility to those whom they lead. They have a responsibility of open leadership, honesty, and fairness. Leaders who don't fulfill this responsibility, in politics or business, become tyrants.

Justice

*Here we discern the most cogent precept in the code of the samurai.
Nothing is more loathsome to him than underhanded dealings and
crooked undertakings.*

*From Bushido: The Soul of Japan,
by Inazo Nitobe, 1899*

Surely Justice lies at the heart of honor for no obligation fulfilled is honorable if the act of fulfilling it creates an injustice. We could spend a great deal of time on a tangent that describes what justice is or is not. Let's simply say that justice is knowing the difference between right and wrong and choosing to do right.

Think of the parable of the man who dies on a journey and had trusted one hundred pounds of gold to his neighbor for safe keeping. No one else knew of the transaction so the neighbor is left with the dilemma of whether or not to act honorably. Of course, the honorable thing to do is return the gold to the man's heirs but there are, in fact, varying levels of honor.

The first and most honorable course is to return the gold to the dead man's family without ever considering theft. A second alternative would be to covet the gold briefly, but then be overtaken with shame and return it. The third possibility is to consider keeping the money but decide against it for fear of being discovered by family or friends. While all three result in the same outcome, fulfillment of giri and remaining honorable, each case reflects a different level of honor.

This case really points out the three levels of character growth each individual must pass through as his sense of honor develops. We begin learning the value of right and wrong by enjoying the favors of our parents for doing right and reaping the consequences of doing wrong. Parents, teachers and our peers are quick to reward or punish us based on their sense of justice. We learn to respond to this by choosing those actions which will result in positive outcome or at least those that are less negative. The older and more mature we become, the more we develop a sense of conscience or shame. This helps us choose alternatives regardless of whether the outcomes will become known. Finally, honor becomes a habit and we find ourselves not even considering wrong alternatives.

Some people never develop a sense of honor. For whatever reason they just don't develop a moral conscience. They go through life constrained only by negative results they perceive for their actions. They measure their response by whether they will get away with it. Fortunately for society, these people are few and far between.

Most people are neither paragons of virtue nor moral derelicts, we are someplace in between. We struggle through each day moving from situation to situation trying to do right.

The famous Confederate general in America's Civil War, General Robert E. Lee, had to make a terrible choice: fulfill his obligation and oath of office to defend the Constitution of the United States, or, as a Virginian, to defend his family, friends, and homeland. While it is easy to have an opinion today, the decision was a terrible one and he decided on the basis of honor. His honor has never been questioned, not today, not in 1865. General Grant, when accepting Lee's surrender at Appomattox, refused to take Lee's sword. Grant's respect for this tremendously honorable man was too great.

While most of us will never be faced with such a decision, conflicts of obligation are common today. For this reason, it is imperative that we hone our sense of justice to guide us through life honorably.

Obligation without justice can be dangerous and lead us to situations of dishonor. Consider the various underworld cultures around the world. At first glance they all act in ways similar to what we have described thus far. They all are obligated to be loyal, support, and protect their leaders and, in turn, their leaders are expected to provide for them in much the same way a military leader is expected to look after his troops. While this may look similar to bushido, we must examine the primary purpose for their actions, to raise money through deceit and crime.

There is no justice in crime. Compelling someone to incriminate himself through a misplaced sense of loyalty is manipulation at its worse. We have no responsibility to giri towards a dishonorable person. Be careful whom you choose to accept favors from and in whose debt you choose to be, lest you put yourself in a situation where you may be asked to dishonor yourself in order to satisfy the debt.

Remember, to be honorable you must always examine your obligations for justice, but you must also have the courage to carry out your obligations.

Courage

To see what is right and not to do it is to want of courage
Confucius

Courage is the virtue we most often associate with warriorship. But courage is required of us in every day life. I had the good fortune to serve with several men who had received the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroism under fire. This, the highest military decoration given by the United States, calls for extraordinary courage but in most cases it did not include a conscious decision to be courageous. In speaking with each of these men, I came to understand that they were placed in a situation where they could either act in the only way they saw was possible, or they could not act. They were men of action for whom giri was so ingrained that there was truly no way they could not act. Their courage is without question; their level of honor, the highest.

Day by day we are not obligated to risk our lives fighting for our leaders. Yet we are often asked to do things where moral courage is at least as important. Moral courage is the fortitude it takes to do the right thing no matter what the personal cost. This is what we are asked most often to provide.

We all face situations in which we see the right course but taking it will put us in jeopardy. Suppose your supervisor suggests that you do something that you believe to be incorrect or even morally wrong. You are faced with carrying out the dishonorable act and thereby dishonoring yourself, or with confronting your supervisor and risking your future. Let us be clear - the honorable response is to not commit the dishonorable act and to confront your supervisor. This confrontation need not be a physical challenge or even an affront. But it does need to be a clear discussion as to why you don't believe what they are asking you to do is right and why you will not do it. This takes courage and our personal honor depends on whether we have the courage to face them responsibly. We need to ask ourselves if we would wish to continue working with this person or organization if we will be asked to commit dishonorable acts.

Please keep in mind that having courage does not mean you do not feel fear. It just means that you are not ruled by it. Fear is a natural human emotion and we all experience it. Some have learned to focus and block out fear but this is only a temporary response.

When rational thought returns, so does the fear. What determines your level of courage is how you handle fear. One warrior described above reported violent shakes once the situation in which he had shown great courage, had passed.

Face, not Honor

Our history is peppered with stories of honor where individuals, public and private, felt their honor had been violated. Their response to such a violation in the past was to have their seconds meet to arrange the appropriate selection of weapons and the location of their “field of honor.” Today, they might respond with a drive by shooting or pushing a match that may lead to blows.

This is not honor! This is face. Face is the way I perceive my peers see me or the way I think society views me. If I think that I have been wronged or embarrassed, then I will respond in a way to ‘save face.’ Face refers to our reputation in the community or circle in which we work. It is prestige and in some cultures is very important. Face is the natural outgrowth of ego. In situations where egos are present, pride in one’s own reputation is an inevitable by-product. Face is not necessarily bad and it should always be considered in any conflict. In any situation of conflict or negotiation, we must consider the need for face in resolving the conflict. The best negotiated settlement allows all parties to save some measure of face.

Cultural Differences?

So what if we are asked by a potential business associate to change our proposal so that we charge an extra 10% for the products or services and to pay that extra fee back to the associate as a finder’s fee? We are choosing to do business in a foreign land and this is the way they do business. Who are we to impose our sense of morality or honor on them? After all, isn’t this just an imposition of our Judeo–Christian morals?

Remember that we are talking about the same code that exists and is recognized in Shinto Buddhism, Islam, Hindu, Judaism, Christianity, and others. In fact, these issues and ideas are not religious, they transcend religious teachings. Motorola’s Bob Galvin tells the story of just such an occurrence as above. His direction was to turn down the business and walk away from what would have been about \$10 million.

This is not about our ethics being different from theirs, and it is not about how wide the chalk line is. The line does not undulate of its own accord. It only appears to undulate because people with less than pure honor are pushing it this way and that. While some of the questions are more or less difficult, they are not more or less right. We may not want to look at a supervisor and risk your job rather than commit an act of fraud, but clearly, that is the honorable, correct thing to do.

As professionals, we must face this responsibility and make the correct choice. We know what it is, we just don’t like the alternatives. The current drive for a better understanding of ethics may be nothing more than our efforts to cause the chalk line to weave a little more in our favor.

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