

The logo for MACRO CONSULTING, INC. features the word "MACRO" in a large, teal, sans-serif font. A thin orange horizontal line is positioned below "MACRO". Below the line, the words "CONSULTING, INC." are written in a smaller, teal, sans-serif font. The background of the slide includes a light gray grid, a dashed gray line sloping upwards from left to right, and a solid orange line sloping downwards from top right to bottom right. There are several teal dots scattered across the grid.

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Business Ethics: Where Did They Go?

Honesty, loyalty and responsibility are passé (where you been, man?).

Author: Paul Richard "Dick" McCullough

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Business Ethics:

Where Did They Go?

Honesty, loyalty and responsibility are passé (where you been, man?). The latest and greatest are selfishness, convenience and bending the truth like it was Gummy in a microwave. But just like the Emperor's new clothes, and for the same reasons, these trendy traits may eventually leave you hanging.

I work in marketing. Even worse, I'm also a writer. So it should go without saying that I am not Mother Teresa. Far from it. My parents, members of a prior generation, seem to think I'm the Philip Marlowe of the private sector. All I'm lacking is the fedora, the cigarette and the sneer. But I've been offended so often (and so recently) that I sometimes feel like a kindergartener wandering wide-eyed and lost through Bangkok.

I've seen market research studies where the data were substantially altered or made up altogether. I've seen consultants lie to their clients on points of fact and then brag about it afterwards. I've heard loud whispers of large and frequent kickbacks, fancy cars driven by those who shouldn't be able to afford them. Why not? We're not choirboys anymore, right?

When I was interviewing for my first professional job almost 25 years ago, the recruiter asked me my opinion of business ethics. I looked at him puzzled, thought for a moment and then told him I didn't see any difference between business ethics and personal ethics. If it's wrong, it's wrong, and you generally know it. He liked that answer. Would he like that answer today? Would he even ask the question?

Back in the day (pass me that rocking chair, will you?), Gary Hart went fishing with Donna Rice and lost any chance of winning his party's presidential nomination. Today, Bill Clinton not only won the nomination of Gary Hart's party, he has been elected president of the country twice and enjoys record approval ratings despite everyone's admission that Monica was just the tip of the iceberg (no puns, please). If we learned anything at all from Clinton's impeachment, wasn't it that anything is ok if you get away with it? And before you Republicans get too smug, I could just have easily used Ronald Reagan (or any number of others) as my unethical poster boy instead of good old Bill.

The American work ethic has also gotten crammed into the atavistic pigeon hole (Go ahead. Grab the dictionary. No one's looking). Can you hire anyone born in this country willing to start at the bottom and work his or her way up? You can practically predict whether or not someone is a US citizen by his or her willingness (or lack thereof) to work an unglamorous job. If the US wasn't geographically adjacent to Mexico, the restaurant industry here would have collapsed years ago. And I'm not just talking about busboys. I mean chefs and managers and owners, too.

When I was starting out, we felt obligated to stick with a job for at least a couple of years before moving on. My dad almost had a heart attack when I decided to leave the security of PG&E (our local energy utility) after a measly four years for that upstart Levi Strauss. Today, employees feel no qualms about accepting a new position before they've even started the old one. And if they actually do show up, there is not an ounce of guilt in the most decent, responsible among them if they leave a few months (or weeks or days) later. It's not that they are malicious; they are sometimes simply unconscious. But that's what worries me. If the best and the brightest are immune to pangs of conscience, what about the rest of them?

I can understand this to some degree. The economy is so revved up, there is an entire generation of workers that have never known a buyers' market. They live with the confidence that they can probably find a job tomorrow better than the one they have today. So why sweat the details? Because sweating the details brings as much to the sweatee as it does to the sweator (or vice versa. I'm not sure which is which but you get the idea, I hope). Bust your butt, demand high standards of yourself, and you become a better person, a more accomplished professional. But we live in a time where we don't have to sweat the details, don't have to pay the price. And the consequence may be a population that is increasingly undisciplined, sloppy, unethical.

Of course, I'm not talking about the rare few that accomplish something. Those that actually create new products, new ideas. They will always exist. And they will always work hard, sweat the details. They enjoy the work. They get something done. And they will reap rewards that go well beyond money. It just seems like there are fewer and fewer of that kind of person out there.

I knew of a young man who had very good prospects. The small company he worked for had been organized and staffed around him. Gave him almost total control. Planned to make him a partner. And he was terrific, temporarily. Worked hard. Great personality. Former fundamentalist minister. Mother Teresa, right? He decided he wanted to move back to his hometown. So he quit. But he didn't move. Apparently after resigning, he realized he couldn't make the money he wanted in that town (did the pay scale suddenly drop after he resigned?). He then actively solicited work from at least one of his ex-employer's clients. His old boss pointed this out as not only unethical but also illegal. He said oops, sorry. Then went out and got a project from another client. He farmed out part of that project with the stipulation "Don't tell my ex-boss." All the while, his ex-boss had been feeding him work to help him get on his feet. I suppose the careers of Jimmie Swaggert and Jim Baker should have been a tip-off to what was coming.

Am I just getting old and cranky? Am I missing something? Or are people less and less concerned with honor and morals and more and more concerned with self? And are they short-changing themselves in the bargain?

A few years ago, I had a Canadian client that was acquired by a major US packaged foods company. The culture shock was devastating. The parent company barged in, ordered everyone around and generally demonstrated that distinctly American combination of arrogance, aggression and stupidity that has made us such famous tourists worldwide. Of course, anyone with any talent left immediately.

There are always potential material consequences to character-less behaviors. The US parent company lost its best Canadian employees by acting so boorishly. Cavalier employees may someday have a rude awakening (I am tempted to pray for a recession). But these external repercussions are not guaranteed. The consultant at the start of this essay who lies to his clients is very successful, very wealthy. Admired by all. Well, admired by some, anyway.

What is guaranteed is the internal experience we each have. Do the right thing and watch how you feel afterward. The Christmas spirit year-round but without all those costly presents to wrap. Do the wrong thing and you either feel like you need a shower on the inside or you've got to fill you life so full you can't feel anything at all. Say, ever notice how busy we've all become?

Behave with honor. Or one day you may look into the mirror and be forced to admit, "The Emperor has no clothes." Behave with honor. Not for them. For you.

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CONTACT US:

Telephone: 650-823-3042

General Inquiries:
info@macroinc.com

Advanced Analysis Inquiries:
analysis@macroinc.com

richard@macroinc.com

www.macroinc.com