

## Ethics: The Irrefutable Foundation of Virtuosity

Even though some could claim that musical virtuosity can exist independently of any moral compass, ethics forms the foundation of the virtuoso. Arguably, most would consider the much-sought-after violinist who sits in the first chair of the world-class symphony a virtuoso, using the traditional definition of the word. This renowned musician may sign and break contracts for his own advancement, fail to show for rehearsals, and generally disregard the rules of civility; yet few would yank his universally accepted title of virtuoso. Therein lies the breakdown of the metaphor. Business simply won't countenance this sort of breakdown. Although abstract and ethereal, for the purpose of this discussion, ethics forms the foundation of all that defines a true virtuoso.

Aristotle helped us understand this point of view more than two-thousand years ago. According to him, the chief good for man is happiness, consisting of rational activity pursued in accordance with virtue. Therefore, living well consists of *doing* something, not just *being* in a certain state or condition. It consists of those lifelong activities that actualize virtues—and as we now understand—create virtuosos.

So, what do virtuosos actually do? Aristotle maintained that the study of ethics seeks not to impart information but to influence conduct. He insisted that ethics is not a theoretical discipline: we are asking what the good for human beings is not simply because we want to have knowledge, but because we will be better able to achieve our good if we develop a fuller understanding of what it is to flourish. Therefore, what is the good?

In business, the difficult and controversial question arises when we ask whether certain of these goods is more desirable than others. For example, years ago I knew a consultant, Bob, who had the answer. Bob, who was based in St. Louis, routinely flew to New York to visit several clients. The agreement between Bob and these clients involved them paying his travel expenses. Therefore, Bob bought a roundtrip first-class ticket, per the agreement, and billed each of the three clients for it. He didn't divide it among the three—he billed each separately for it and pocketed the difference. Legal? Probably. Ethical? No, but then I don't recall anyone accusing Bob of virtuosity.

Although Bob did what was good for him, Aristotle's search for *the* good is a search for the *highest* good, and he assumes that the highest good, whatever it turns out to be, has three characteristics: it is desirable for itself, it is not desirable for the sake of some other good, and all other goods are desirable for its sake. Obviously Bob's decision to profit from the price of an airline ticket doesn't stand up to Aristotle's test.

It's not always quite so easy, however. At one point in U.S. history, the constitution allowed for the ownership of slaves and prevented women from voting. Great minds considered both "right" and in the best interest of the common good. Similarly, at one time, people considered a person's private life separate from his professional life, but things change.

Point that out to former Boeing CEO, Harry Stonecipher, whom the board ousted in 2005 for an extramarital affair. Apparently the affair did not violate a specific company prohibition because the female executive did not directly report to Stonecipher. However, the conduct violated Boeing's business Code of Conduct that prohibited acts that "hurt the company's

reputation.” Ironically, Stonecipher was responsible for implementing the ethics code, which he forced all Boeing employees to sign once a year, that ultimately cost him the job.

Sometimes timing and cultural mores play a role in the perception of ethics, as they did for General Joseph Ralston, former vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In June of 1997, most thought Ralston would advance to the number one military position—Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Certainly, then Defense Secretary William Cohen did. Then he learned that Ralston had engaged in an extramarital affair thirteen years earlier while Ralston and his first wife were separated. Initially Cohen stated that the affair wouldn’t “automatically disqualify” Ralston from becoming the nation’s No. 1 military officer. However, coming on the heels of the Kelly Flinn incident, it did.

Flinn, an Air Force Academy graduate and the first female B-52 pilot—a top performer by any measure—faced court-martial in May of 1997 for disobeying an order to end an affair with a civilian who was married to an enlisted woman in Flinn’s chain of command. (Flinn was later allowed to resign). Both Ralston and Flinn had violated the military code of conduct, The Uniform Code of Military Justice, which prohibits adultery, and both paid a price.

Many sympathized with Ralston, since although technically married at the time of his affair, he was separated from his wife. Cohen and others at the Pentagon invested time and energy trying to show why Ralston’s transgression wasn’t as severe as Flinn’s. According to them, whereas Flinn had lied about her affair and disobeyed an order to stop seeing her boyfriend, Ralston had his fling while separated. Further, when Ralston had his affair, he was attending the National War College and had no troops under his command, and therefore, according to Cohen, didn’t compromise “good order and discipline” as Flinn had. All this

happened seven months before their Commander in Chief uttered his infamous line: “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” General Ralston withdrew his name from consideration for the Chairman position and continued to serve on active duty for six more years.

As Aristotle noted thousands of years ago, opinions differ about what is best for human beings. As any student of organizational theory knows, those differences of opinion pale in comparison to the debates that rage about differences in ethics, morality, and legality. Many excuse behaviors that would ordinarily seem wrong, but when done for the betterment of the organization, can be forgiven. (One might note that Aristotle never had a sales quota). Similarly, legal loopholes allow for wrong-minded logic. Philosophers since Aristotle have tried to explain ethics in more practical terms, but I embrace the three criteria he posited:

The action is desirable for itself.

The action is not desirable for the sake of some other good.

All other goods are desirable for its sake.

Virtuosos don’t acquire their ethical foundations solely by learning general rules. They also acquire them through practice—those deliberative, emotional, and social skills that enable them to put their general understanding of well-being into practice in ways that are suitable to each occasion. Similarly, virtuosos understand that they can’t “teach” ethics to others by requiring their signatures on a statement, as Stoncipher did. They must *exemplify* ethics in their personal and professional lives. At a visceral level, virtuosos understand Hemingway’s observation that “What is moral is what you feel good after. What is immoral is what you feel

bad after.” This awareness is one of the things that separates the virtuoso from other top performers.