

# Rulers of the Game

"I prefer a free-market system where the consumer has power, the consumer makes choices, the consumer knows the costs, and the producer tries to produce a better product at a lower cost to have a bigger market share by pleasing people." —Newt Gingrich

A GLINT OF SUN APPEARS on the horizon as the voice of Newt announces the dawning of The Third Wave, where people are so feverish to please other people that their ethical ice caps are melting. Wobbleworld. A flood of sales ruses and public-relations stunts is unleashed. Language and mores are forced to adapt. There is tremendous confusion about right and wrong, and the younger ones begin to grunt like Dennis Hopper.

Mutations are inevitable. Witness a bold new formulation of "honesty" from the NRA's Paul Blackman, who has been writing letters to the editor since the '70s in support of the gun and tobacco industries and signing them with the name of his invisible friend, "Theodore H. Fiddleman."

"In a sense," Blackman told the *Washington Post* recently, "I have enhanced honesty by letting people read a letter without the public saying, 'Oh, the NRA, let's dismiss this.'" Enhancement is one of the prime commandments in Third Wave information-age dogma, for the simple reason that unless you can give something the *appearance* of having been improved, you can only sell it once.

Recently, Blackman reports, he has been working closely with the new Republican leader-

ship, a great and wise council whose members are hot to "enhance" capitalism by taking it off its leash, and to enlighten the American people once and for all about the value of an unfettered free market.

Labyrinthine bureaucracies and generous public assistance have dulled our senses, and we are slow to understand. But we are trying to learn the goodness of their ways. Carefully, they explain the virtues of cutting burdensome regulations and rewarding the private sector with more discretion over its own affairs. They are so patient with us. And, after many months of C-SPAN lectures, we begin to understand: red tape—bad;

profit motive—good. The private sector is just people pleasing people. In a sense.

We get confused all over again, though, when we read a recent poll in which 95 percent of American business school students admitted cheating. *Enhanced honor code?* Plagiarism is also rampant, as several studies confirm "widespread unethical attitudes and practices [by] U.S. accounting students."

Men with cardigan sweaters and furrowed brows wear looks of distress and speak of rotten fruit. "We used to look at bad apples," University of Dayton professor John Quinn says of today's crop of MBA students. "Now we're focused on the barrel."

His colleague Philip Vorherr chimes in. "I don't know that there's a whole lot we can do," he tells me. "There have always been business scandals, but when my parents were growing up, they weren't exposed to this constant barrage of unethical behavior. They weren't exposed to the O.J. lawyers who'll do anything to get their client off, regardless of right and wrong."

While many of us tend to view a rapid ethical decline as a potential global threat, the students themselves prefer to think of the whole thing as a day at the movies. *Relax, dudes.*



MIKE LUCKOVICH

"We're just taking a break," says one accounting student. "We'll likely get back to [the rules] later." No surprise that, given a chance to rate their own ethical values, they come out gleaming.

BUT MAYBE WE ARE being a little uptight, too quick to judge. Perhaps these young business scholars are more studious than even their professors realize. Cheating, plagiarizing, separating business school ethics from real life ethics—these up-and-comers may simply be taking the cues of two legendary "classical" business ethicists from Harvard.

Digging into the "Ethics, Inc." archives for a lesson on enhanced civility, we find this little missive: "Discard the Golden Rule," Albert Carr beckoned to all budding capitalists in a 1968 *Harvard Business Review* article which argued that "the ethics of business are game ethics, different from the ethics of religion.... In the business game, truth-telling usually has to be kept within narrow limits if trouble is to be avoided."

A business ethicist and a keen family therapist, Carr also knew the importance of enhanced domestic tranquillity: "An executive's family life can easily be dislocated if he fails to make a sharp distinction between the ethical systems of the home and the office—or if his wife does not grasp that distinction."

As for the consumer, business game ethics help the confused purchaser sort through all of his or her psychological needs, explained former *Review* editor Theodore Levitt in 1970. "Embellishment and distortion are among advertising's legitimate and socially desirable purpose [*sic*]," he wrote. "The consumer suffers from an old dilemma: he wants 'truth,' but he also [needs] the alleviating imagery and tantalizing promise of the advertiser and designer."

Truth through fantasy. Healthy marriage through barbaric office behavior. The enhancement of life through marketing shenanigans. Mutations we learn to live with—or, just like Blackman, blame on an invisible friend.

—David Shenk

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