

Chapter 5

Why Should a Business Manager Be Moral?

We have looked at economic outcomes (Chapter 2), legal requirements (Chapter 3), and ethical duties (Chapter 4) as means of resolving the moral problems of management, and we have found that none are completely satisfactory. None of those analytical methods can give us an answer that we can say with absolute certainty provides an equitable, fair-to-all balance between the financial outputs and the social impacts of a business firm. And none of those analytical methods can give us a means of truly convincing all of the other people who have been affected by those outputs and impacts, either positively or negatively, that our decision was indeed the best one possible.

But why is this important? Why should managers attempt to be moral in their decisions and actions? And, particularly, why should managers attempt to convince other people that they have reached the best balance of economic outcomes, legal requirements, and ethical duties that was possible, given the available alternatives? Perhaps we should all simply resolve not to lie, cheat, or steal, and then begin to look after the interests of the firm that has hired us to do exactly that to the very best of our abilities. Then, we could forget about any need to be moral beyond those elementary “don’t lie, cheat, or steal” rules, and particularly, we could forget about any need to convince others of the logical nature of our morality. A totally amoral person—one who did not stop to think about the rightness or justness or fairness of his or her decisions, but instead concentrated upon profits for his or her employer and benefits for his or her self—might be expected to be far more successful in purely financial terms for both of those entities over any reasonable period of time. Why should all of us not do exactly that?

The answer on one level is that if we want others to worry about whether their treatment of us is right and just and fair, then we have to worry about our treatment of them. Reciprocity is the most logical reason for morality. But, the world is filled with people who are not logical in the sense of recognizing reciprocity and the need to be consistent. The world is filled with people who might well say, “We’ll take our chances on your treatment of us later on, after we try to get what we want now, and if we do indeed get what we want now, then we won’t have to worry about your treatment of us later on.” How do we react to those people? Do we simply cede to them the first place in financial benefits and managerial positions, and hope that eventually they will learn that “what goes around comes around”? That is not a very satisfactory solution for most of the rest of us, who under that rationale would be forced to wait and hope for an eventual breakthrough in the attitudes or powers of those individuals.