

BRINGING YOUR CONSCIENCE TO WORK

G. Richard Shell

There is an increasingly urgent problem in professional life: standing up for core values such as honesty, personal dignity, fairness, and justice when the pressure is on to look the other way.

The consequences of getting these decisions wrong can be significant. When a boss or peer pushes you to engage in (or go along with) conduct you know to be unethical or illegal, a misstep can ruin your career—especially in a world where social media opens the doors into every office. And standing by while others engage in sexual harassment or office bullying empowers the wrong people to do the wrong thing, destroying morale and productivity. Finally, your day-to-day tolerance for those who cut ethical corners sets the standard for the “normal” way to get things done. Remaining silent while a boss lies to a client may be only a small step, but it’s a step down the wrong road. You are letting yourself be led by your fears instead of choosing to lead with your conscience.

As a senior member of the Wharton faculty and chair of its Legal Studies and Business Ethics Department, I led the most recent school-wide initiative to redesign our MBA program. Part of that effort involved combining two short courses, one on business law and the other on business ethics, into a single, longer, required course called “Responsibility in Business.” Believing I had a duty to lead by example, I volunteered to teach this new MBA class the first time it was offered. Little did I know when I stepped into this classroom how much my students would end up teaching *me* about the day-to-day ethical challenges that ordinary employees face inside the pressure cooker we call “the modern workplace.”

Here are just a few of the more alarming stories my students shared in this class:

- A young, gay **management consultant** was propositioned for sex by a client while working on a project in the Middle East. He politely declined, then reported the incident to his project leader (a partner at his firm) and asked for feedback about how he had handled it. His boss responded that he had made the wrong choice and requested that he go back and “make the client happy” to increase the chances for follow-up consulting business. The young consultant answered with an outraged “No”—and received a poor performance appraisal when the project was over.
- A sales employee at a **high-tech startup** was pressured to create a list of fake clients, complete with orders from these “customers,” so the firm’s ambitious founder could reference it in pitches for venture funding.

- A **private equity** analyst watched as her boss blatantly misrepresented the value of several companies in the firm's portfolio. The firm was raising a new round of investment capital, and the partner did not want to disclose the true state of these poor-performing assets to prospective investors. A week after the new funds were raised, the partner downgraded the value of these companies.
- A **bond trader** joined his peers in routinely lying to customers about the assets backing the debt he was selling. He thought his moral compass would always point him in the right direction, but he found it hard to follow his conscience "when everyone around you is breaking the rules." Several senior colleagues on his trading floor were eventually indicted for securities fraud.

Stories like these opened a world of dubious business practices I had only read about. During office hours, I found myself talking with students about the challenges they had faced and their desires to meet the next ones with more courage and confidence. These conversations inspired me to offer help and redoubled my commitment to teaching the "Responsibility" course. I came to realize I was getting a unique, highly informed window into the world of modern business life for today's employees. Because many of these students had no interest in returning to their former employers, they were more than willing to tell the unvarnished truth about what they had experienced.

Remaining silent ... may be only a small step, but it's a step down the wrong road

I now understand that my students' stories are part of a much larger pattern. A recent report published in the *Harvard Business Review* revealed that roughly 25 percent of employees report pressure by bosses to behave unethically (or illegally). Based on what my students tell me year after year, I believe this number significantly underestimates the situation. For one thing, it does not include the pressures exerted by corrupt business cultures such as the one the bond trader described above. Many professionals in fast-paced tech and finance industries stop thinking of dubious practices as improper because "everybody does it."

Just as concerning, workers are fearful about reporting misconduct they observe in others. According to the Ethics Resource Center, over 40 percent of US workers witness unethical and/or illegal conduct on the job in a given year. Other studies have shown that most of this goes unreported and, even when flagged, ends up on the desk of a supervisor who lacks the backbone or motivation to do anything about it. Well-run corporate compliance programs and healthy corporate cultures can reduce this problem significantly, but these are hard to sustain across large enterprises over long periods of time. And too many companies give only lip service to both.

In short, my students are not outliers. They are telling it like it is. But that does not mean they are happy about the situation. They keenly feel the loss of self-respect that comes when they violate their own standards of conduct or stand by as others commit crimes. As their teacher, I try to reinforce how much more satisfied they will feel about themselves and their work if they commit to upholding a very short list of core values.

All my writing and teaching has emphasized in different ways what Adam Smith, the moral philosopher credited with being the founding father of competitive market capitalism, called the profound “tranquility” that comes from living an honest life. In this book, I advocate for Smith’s point of view. Authentic, lasting success in any profession demands adherence to the highest standards of integrity. When you bring your sense of right and wrong to work, you can enjoy tranquility in that most private of all domains: your conscience.

And while this sounds easy to do when we discuss it in the classroom, I constantly remind my students how hard this can be when the heat is on to make deadlines, please bosses, and fulfill client demands. You must prepare now to meet the challenges to come.

As Albert Einstein said, “The world is a dangerous place. Not because of those who do evil but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

During my years as a business school professor, I have listened to more than my share of pious speeches by business leaders who say that creating a principled culture is Job #1. But unless people step up to demand accountability when bosses or peers violate basic ethical norms, including norms of common decency, talented people will flee when they can and, when they cannot, give far less than their best. Standing up for yourself and your values—following your conscience regardless of your place in the organization—affirms your true character and empowers others to speak. Your voice says to others, “I am ready to make a difference.” It is an expression of faith that others will do the same thing in moments that matter.

Don't you hope, when lives are on the line, that you and your family can depend on hospital workers willing to stand up to powerful physicians who put their personal convenience over patient safety? And don't you want to be on the same team as the honest professionals who call out political corruption, corporate fraud, and sexual misconduct?

I had heard many stories about my students' ethical challenges at work. For every employee who has the opportunity to walk away from the type of abusive, unethical behavior they've faced, there are hundreds who face the same pressures but feel powerless to push back because their choices are more limited.

I decided to map out a set of research-based rules—a Conscience Code—to help them (and you) stand and fight. Indeed, that is why I have identified the first rule of this code as "Face the Conflict." When you turn toward the problem instead of away from it, you challenge yourself to become part of the solution.

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DUTY, CHARACTER, RESPONSIBILITY: IT'S PERSONAL

This subject is personal for me. I was raised in a Marine Corps family. Duty, character, and responsibility were part of the fabric of our lives.

My father was a decorated World War II veteran and career military officer. By the time I was old enough to be aware of my surroundings, he was the commanding general at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in Parris Island, South Carolina. Parris Island is one of the two training facilities (the other is in San Diego, California) where raw recruits are brought in and exposed to one of the most rigorous military training regimes in the world, departing three months later (assuming they don't drop out) as United States Marines. This training uses immersive methods to help recruits acquire habits of character, teamwork, and responsibility. Doing the right thing the right way under the most extreme pressures imaginable is what "honor" means in this environment.

When he retired from the Marines, my father became the superintendent (i.e., president) of the Virginia Military Institute, the college he had attended as a student. Watching him in both his military and educational careers, I came to understand what duty meant to him: being devoted to his family, taking care of the people he worked with, and serving as a leader for the communities we lived in. He never raised his voice, choosing to lead by his steady example. And my stay-at-home mom, though a foot shorter than he was, stood as his equal partner in every sense. Coming from this family tradition, I have always taken my duties seriously. Part of my personal mission is to influence those I teach and lead to do the same.

I wrote my new book, *The Conscience Code*, to extend that mission. I wrote it to prepare you for two of the most difficult challenges you will face in your professional career. First, to do the right thing when bosses or peers want you to do something you know to be wrong. And second, to speak up effectively when you become aware of wrongdoing by others.

Every time you successfully meet one of these two challenges, you inspire others to do the same. You are part of the solution, adding one more brick to the foundations of a society you want to be part of.

IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN "WHISTLEBLOWING"

When you hear stories about ordinary people who stand up against bad bosses or corrupt organizations, one word generally comes to mind: "whistleblowers." The "whistleblower" label is an appropriate term for describing those who expose large-scale wrongdoing at great personal and professional risk. But it can mislead you into thinking that everyday acts of character and courage—such as speaking up against sexual harassment or insisting on honesty with clients and investors—do not really "count." In addition, as one of the great whistleblowers of the 20th century, Dr. Jeffrey Wigand, noted, the label carries a negative connotation: whistleblowers are sometimes seen as "snitches"—people who break faith with loyal colleagues by calling out their bad behavior. Wigand, who was famous for exposing the tobacco industry's decades-long conspiracy to suppress research linking smoking to cancer, preferred a broader term for those who stand up for their values: "people of conscience."

I hope you will embrace Wigand's phrase. Most of us will never meet a "whistleblower," but we all know people of conscience we admire as role models. And even if you are never pressed into service to call out high-stakes wrongdoing, you will add huge value to your organization and stand taller in your own eyes as well as the eyes of those who love you by speaking up on behalf of core values that are being ignored. Indeed, these everyday moments are what stop organizational corruption from taking hold, maintaining the honest corporate cultures that make whistleblowing unnecessary. The "person of conscience" label also captures the importance of standing up for *yourself* as well as your values. That means speaking out when you experience discrimination and other forms of disrespect.

I'd like to encourage you to adopt this label as a part of your personal identity. People of conscience are those who take actions in everyday professional life that protect and promote the human good. They consistently speak up on behalf of professional standards and personal principles that are important to us all—ranging from scientific and accounting standards to honest dealing and fair play. If you are someday called to be a whistleblower, this book will help you think it through. In the meantime, whenever you face a tough ethical decision, I suggest you focus on your identity as a "person of conscience" who can tell right from wrong.

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The phrase “person of conscience” also has personal significance to me. Although, as I noted above, I was brought up in the Marine Corps, I took a very different road in my early twenties. I was in college during the Vietnam War era and faced a choice between military service to fight a war I believed was morally wrong, and finding a way to resist. I resolved this dilemma by becoming a “conscientious objector”—a legal term for a person of conscience who objects to military service on principled grounds. Conscientious objectors serve their country by doing non-military forms of national service, and mine was to work in the most impoverished sections of Washington, D.C., helping relocate poor families who lived in condemned housing. Needless to say, my decision to protest the war caused a split in my family, but my father and I ultimately reconciled our divergent views about war through our mutual respect and love for each other. We understood our duties differently in two very different eras of American history. But at the end of the day, I was my father’s son. I answered my call to duty, just as he had answered his.

As I see it, you do not need to be a philosopher or theologian to know that you should be honest with your investors, fair to your customers, and unwilling to tolerate workplace sexual harassment or racism. Most of the value conflicts you will face at work will ultimately boil down to your personal character and your identity as a person of conscience.

One of my favorite quotes from the research I did for *The Conscience Code* is Will Durant’s well-known summary of Aristotle’s virtue ethics: “You are what you repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” **As a person of conscience, you will bring your moral courage to work every day. Others will look to you as a role model for ethical action. You will remind them, when they are most tempted to forget, that everything worth doing is worth doing with integrity.** 📖

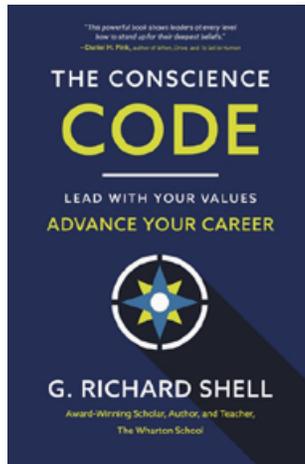
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G. Richard Shell is Chair of the Wharton School's Legal Studies and Business Ethics Department. His books on negotiation, influence, and success have sold over half a million copies in seventeen languages, and his online course on "Success" has reached tens of thousands of people around the world. An award-winning teacher and scholar, Richard led the most recent redesign of the Wharton School's MBA curriculum and helped create its required Responsibility in Business course. He directs week-long workshops on negotiation and strategic persuasion for senior executives.

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