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INTEGRITY and SELF-ESTEEM: TEACHABLE?

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“We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals; now we know that it is bad economics.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt

There is, of late, much discussion about how to fix this world financial mess. In order to do so we obviously must correctly identify causes before we can prescribe remedies. But are we looking in the right places? Even if we have the right rubric are we digging deep enough to make a significant difference in the transformation of the attitudes and behaviors of our business leaders? No.

Ethics, integrity, trust and conscience, are not new topics; but in business their negatively metastasized manifestations force us to address them in that domain. Clearly, business schools have not successfully integrated ethics, morality, trust or conscience into their curriculum that has made much of an impact on its graduates. The inferred conclusions from Kelley Holland’s article, *“Is it Time to Retrain B-Schools?”* (NY Times) is a resounding yes. She makes the failure in educational institutions to successfully integrate meaningful ethics into business models abundantly clear; and the price, well, is obvious.

The lack of integrity in decision-making does not belong specifically to the financial world. We are aware that no one profession is exempt from dipping into ethically challenged behaviors, whether they are doctors, lawyers, accountants, hospital administrators, boards of directors of not-for-profit organizations, government officials or politicians. All disciplines would do well to incorporate specifically designed steps for the integration of integrity development into their school curriculums.

Ben W. Heineman Jr., in his recent book, *“High Performance with High Integrity,”* suggests and delineates using integrity processes and procedures as guidelines for CEO’s to use in transforming their cultures. He contends, and I agree, they will, if they integrate these guidelines, consequently, out perform and out live companies which reflect the current shortsighted, bottom-line-values driven businesses. But unless those processes and procedures are connected to a process of exploring areas of self that are below our levels of awareness, and by that I do mean exploring unintentional, unconscious motivations, we will only make short-term, short-sighted changes. The mastery of integrity driven choices requires the mastery of one’s own decision-making processes. There is no way that this can happen without focusing on areas of the self which make many, especially in the business world, at best, uncomfortable, and at worst, destructively committed to perpetuating their inflated self-esteem.

I do not draw attention to the self-esteem issue in a judgmental way. This devastating, global seismic financial upheaval is not about good guys and bad guys, although there are victims and perpetrators. As a Psychologist and Executive Coach I sit with victims of financial malfeasance and I sit with the perpetrators of that malfeasance. My compassion is not limited to the former since the perpetrators, in most cases, know and care that their actions have cost their fellow humans dearly; and cost themselves not just financial ruin, but debilitating remorse and loss of

self-esteem. There are some, as hard as that is for most of us to accept, who actually don't seem to care if they have wronged self or others. They are, by and large, the leaders who collect external imagined validations of their worth. They, I trust, will fall in the business schism between yesterday and tomorrow. Today, we have work to do.

And that work begins by recognizing this recent financial trauma is simply a new awakening to an age-old reality of the lack of a huge number of people to fail to exercise their personal ethical responsibility in the context of 'business.' But know, if one fails, we all fail, because that one, depending on her (his) position of power in an organization, starts a trend. If I say Nazi Germany, it is clear to most what is meant here.

Solving the economic crisis is not going to be done by re-engineering economic tools as Akerlof and Schiller support in their book, *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why it Matters for Global Capitalism.* Today's problems, they concur, can be best understood as a failure of business to look at noneconomic motivations and irrational behavior. Just where business leaders fear to look. Yet they must look, if they are serious about a real paradigm shift for business.

It is in our non-economic motivations in transactions that we find our most impacting forces; those which dictate our ethics, integrity and the trust we engender in our stakeholder partners, and in our reliability as partners in this globally available world. Further, and more specifically, we need to include, as a primary teaching tool, the education of the foundations of self-esteem.

It is my experience that CEO's who have REAL self-esteem present themselves as confident, humble, kind, generous and are wonderful leaders whose integrity is transparent. Those leaders who present themselves as 'full of themselves,' needing to prove their prowess at any given moment, and appear larger than life, are suffering from low self-esteem and are building their companies (and our world) to compensate for that personal lack of, REAL, solid, well earned self-esteem.

Strength needs no fanfare; it sustains itself and does not need to be proven, it simply shows in the context of all transactions. Power is fleeting; it is not connected to solid, reasonable levels of self (esteem). It constantly needs to be fed, with more money, and more acquisitions to sustain its false sense of reality. Power driven choices have no regard for ethics; the secret feeding of low self-esteem is the paramount driving force in these decisions. Simply put, when self-esteem is low, the need to prove that it is not, is a huge 'unseen,' or rather, un-discussed factor in sustaining our 'bottom line' greed driven, unethical business practices.

Can we fix this? Absolutely. We do have tools for that education. All we need are those with enough Self esteem in business and business schools to open the door to that level of instruction. It will require up front time and resources. But what doesn't? The pay off, however, will be remarkable. That self-esteem energy resource is deep and rich and cannot be depleted; the transformation of low to high self esteem energy will make all the difference in producing sustainable, transparent, creative approaches to solving serious global issues.

It is thrilling to see some businesses move toward real transparency. Encouragingly thrilling. Driven by the horrific financial and human losses in food industries we now have actions such as the creation of FindtheFarmer.com, where customers and food growers are connecting. The

particular joy of this manifest sea change in the conduct of that business is that it is a sign of hope for us all. Re-connecting with our source of true nourishment, our food (environment) is vital for sustaining a more humble embrace of our connected humanity.

It is imperative that our leaders in every domain develop transparency protocols. But it is only when we develop them in relation to the need for transparency with ourselves in regard to our decisions and the motivations behind them that we can hope to create transparency in our business and personal choices. No amount of regulation, questionnaires of accountability, ‘best practices’ exercises, or governance legislation will increase low self-esteem, which seems to drive so many.

Changing behavior is not really that difficult, transforming motivations of behavior, that is difficult. Behavior modification techniques are part of a paradigm that was built on a scientific (reductionist) model, just as business models were. Those models were intended to expedite and control outcomes. Not a bad desire, we all want to control our environments to secure a feeling of relative safety, but the price of these reductionist models has been an enormous dis-connection in people from themselves, and therefore, in all they do. We have paid a steep, spiritually destructive price for valuing speed and chips above integrity for the depth and dignity of each precious, unique human being.

When Anwar Ibrahim (*former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and current Honorary President of AccountAbility*) stated, *“The world is awash with accountability. And yet some of our greatest achievements in accountability are now characterized by bureaucratic excess and decay, if not outright greed and corruption. Just as yesterday's innovations were once a sign of great hope, we must reinvent accountability for the 21st century.”* Yes we must. And we begin with the education of our selves, our students, and our colleagues in terms of the meaning of transparency, especially as it relates to self-esteem. The truth is, self-esteem shows. And little by little, unless business leaders (and their consultants) make their choices from a more informed place of self-knowledge and are able to transform false, power-driven self-esteem into true strength in leadership, they will be shunned. This is a wonderful time. ##