Ethics

The Foundation of Relationships and Business

Whenever you do a thing, act as if all the world were watching.

—Thomas Jefferson

The ability to act ethically and to work for a good outcome for everyone involved is the mark of a truly successful individual, and paves the way toward your goals of freedom and prosperity. You are confronted daily with determining right actions and establishing trust. Investing time to ensure you have a strong foundation for ethical behavior—in your personal life, professional life, how you code and how you deal with others—is an immensely beneficial activity, and it is a core requirement for achieving true wealth and independence.

Virtually every interaction in business is based on trust—trust in the process and trust that the rules of engagement are followed by everyone involved. For the vast majority of interactions and transactions, this trust relationship stands, and those who engage in business abide by these rules. In cases when the interactions follow a pattern that has been set, such as in a simple exchange of money for a product, the rules are simple and it is easy to determine the appropriate action. However, as you move down the path of business independence, you will encounter many scenarios that are unique and for which you don't have an immediate answer for how best to proceed. In all cases, you must be able to determine what the most appropriate action is.

The ethical businessperson is, by necessity, an individual who thinks and who conducts constant self-review. By living with the guiding principal of doing everything "as if all the world were watching", and by careful study of yourself, of your motivations, and of those around you, you'll be certain you are taking the appropriate steps to work in the most ethical manner possible.

■ **Rule** At the foundation of your success is your character. An ethical character creates success that leads to abundance and opportunity for everyone involved—you and everyone you encounter. A character based on deceit, immorality, and lack of virtues leads to success that may appear attractive on the surface (fame or material gain, for instance), but behind which lies a trail of pain, loss, and destruction for everyone involved—you and everyone around you.

The Transitory Nature of Morality

In a society in which right and wrong are relative, and morality is considered to be something of personal choice—where the evils of yesterday are elevated to the good of today, and people are applauded for the very acts for which they were reprimanded yesterday—it can be debated whether appropriate personal and professional behavior is dependent on the situation, the day, the culture, or your mood.

■ **Rule** To be morally and ethically relativistic is to walk the common road. To take the high path, and live and work at your greatest potential, you must constantly examine, challenge, and refine your core beliefs, actions, and ideas. There are fundamental truths and correct ways of living and interacting, and it is up to you to search these out and understand them.

The challenge of determining the right action has been an ongoing subcurrent of the human drama. In *The Journey and Ordeal of Cabeza de Vaca*, which is a first-hand account by Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca written in the 16th century, the customs of the native Mariames tribe are described. For fear of marriage to a potential enemy, tribesmen rarely allowed a girl to live. "They cast away their daughters at birth; the dogs eat them." So, too, they would kill the majority of their sons, if told to do so in a dream. These customs, although looked at by other cultures (then and now) as diabolical, were regarded among that specific tribe as both moral and acceptable, and even ethically responsible.

There are endless examples throughout time of people who engaged in customs that we can identify immediately as morally void and ethically lacking. Cannibals lived in a society that embraced and revered the practice, American plantation owners had slaves, and the common man throughout history despised and killed Jews. At each of these times, people deemed "good and honest" by those around them engaged in behaviors that others in different time periods would say were ignorant, foolish, and wrong.

What society says is good is not a measure of good, and what society says is wrong is not proof of something being wrong. You have to be able to step away, study, think, and be willing to know what is right and wrong, regardless

of political correctness, the judgment of others, and the whims of the age in which you live. A careful study of history, philosophy, and religion may aid you in this endeavor, but ultimately you must be willing to stand on your own.

An independent businessperson, whose wealth is self-made, must be willing to be stand alone in thought and action. True independence comes with a recognition of eternal truths and adherence to rules and behaviors that have governed the conduct of men and women throughout time.

Fundamental Ethics of Behavior

Underneath the current of political shifts, cultural divides, and relative truths, there is a longstanding tradition of fundamental rules of behavior, of morality, of ethics. These truths date back through the ages and across cultures, and define the ways in which we deal with one another socially. Business exchanges are one of these key interactions.

Study is critical. If you want to become a master of something, turn to the masters to teach you. The foundations of truth and ethical behavior can be found in the ancient teachers, philosophers, and religions. If you were planning a year-long expedition to a foreign land, you would fare far better if you were to read guides and descriptions from people who had been there before. As you make your journey into professional success, so, too, will you fare better if you study those who went before you.

In our current culture, we disdain what is old and think those who came before us were simpletons, closer to the apes than we are today. There is talk that we are constantly improving, that a Golden Age awaits us. These ideas are based on a misguided understanding of the nature of humans. The future is not always better, and current minds don't necessarily know more than those of the past.

In actuality, our ancestors had great wisdom, and they should be turned to in matters that are fundamental to how we function in this life. Business has been around since the dawn of humans, and the rules that outline ethical behavior date back to the mists of antiquity. Make a practice of reading books of ancient wisdom—famous philosophers, ancient thinkers. You likely won't achieve your full potential unless you are willing to spend time with the great minds of the past.

■ **Rule**   You will not always succeed in taking the most ethical path. Perfection in anything is not possible, but striving for perfection is. As a professional working to achieve the highest level of functioning, you must always work to determine the right actions, but failure must be an expected part of the process. As Marcus Aurelius wrote in *Meditations*, "Do not be disgusted, discouraged, or dissatisfied if you do not succeed in doing everything according to right principles; but when you have failed, return again, and be content if the greater part of what you do is consistent."

There are several questions you can ask yourself in all situations when determining appropriate and ethical action. They are as follows:

1. **What am I basing my behavior on?** All of us have mentors. We learn from every encounter around us— individuals, groups, speeches, books, television. Those with which and with whom you spend your time are those that influence you, consciously or subconsciously. During the course of a week, determine who is influencing you by determining with whom or with what you are spending time. Are the individuals around you positive, thoughtful, and open-minded, or do you spend your time in crass conversation with small-thinking people? Do you spend your free hours doing something that builds character? Or do you spend time doing something that promotes detrimental thoughts and actions? Whatever you surround yourself with and whatever you have exposed yourself to in the past combine to create your behavior and judgment. Review the things and decide whether they further the pursuit of your goals.

2. **Is this action in line with how others are acting?** Anytime we part with how things are done traditionally, we must do so with deep awareness and constant review. The standard flow of society around us has many aspects that should be avoided, and it takes work to understand where we should part from the norm. So if we part from the way of others, we should be very aware of the reasons why, and make sure we do so for appropriate reasons.

3. **Is what I am doing defensible?** As you chart your own course in business, there will be times when the right next step is not obvious, and there will be no one to discuss with or help you to determine the appropriate action. You must decide for yourself what direction you will take and how you will handle the situation. In situations when there is no precedent, ask yourself: If I were placed before a judge, a jury, a set of peers, would my action be defensible? Would I be strong in my conviction of having done this? If you cannot defend your actions in your imagined setting, then you have not come to a viable solution to your situation.

■ **Rule**   On occasion, new ideas and ways of viewing the world and our activities in it are brought to light. Revolutionaries, sages, prophets, and geniuses can help us change the way in which we perceive the world and the rules with which we engage. However, in the vast majority of cases, the rules of conduct should be followed. If you find yourself acting in ways that don't align with those who came before you, especially in the case of ethical behavior, you should be very cautious.

The Ethics of Business

In virtually everyone there exists at the same time a strong desire to be successful and wealthy, and a strong distrust of those who are successful and wealthy. Power of any nature breeds jealousy, envy, fear, and suspicion in those who see it. There are many who distrust businesspeople because they distrust the system—primarily because they do not have the strength or will to be part of it.

As you walk the path from programmer to businessperson, you must be aware of the changes you are going through and the changed perceptions of those around you. You can't be too concerned with the thoughts, comments, and criticisms of your peers, but be cognizant that judgments are being made and actions are being scrutinized. You must be able to apply this awareness to all aspects of business, which include the following considerations.

1. **Billing and fees**. Are you being just in the way you come up with your fee structures and how you bill for your work? Chapter 9 includes an expansive discussion about fees and appropriate ways to engage with a client. Always keep the best interests of all parties in mind—your client, yourself, your subcontractors—in all that you do in relation to billing and fees, and you will come out unscathed if your ethics are questioned.

2. **Attainment and alignment of skills**. Having current, cutting-edge skills and knowing the technologies with which you work is paramount. Countless projects have been managed and worked by people who have no business doing so. Numerous solutions have been coded by developers who have no skill in the coding languages being used. Align yourself and your skills properly on projects, and be open and honest about your experience. This is the most appropriate and ethical way of working on a project. (In many cases, clients want junior programmers to work on projects, but they never want a junior programmer to act as a seasoned architect to design their solutions.)

3. **Use of wealth**. As you make your money, be aware of how you are using it. What are you investing in? What causes are you furthering? You should have your own personal objectives of how to donate a portion of your income. Whether to a church, a secular charity, or private causes, a portion of your income needs to flow to others without the expectation of getting anything back. Chapter 12 has information on considerations of how to use your wealth.

4. **Business relationships**. In your various encounters with people in your professional life, always work to aim for the best interest of all parties. Never approach a situation with a desire for personal gain, but rather with the mind-set that all of you may have something to offer each other. Keeping in contact, meeting for lunch, discussing opportunities, all of these activities—even when you are doing them as part of your sales process—should always be pursued with the specific goal of furthering the business relationship and working for a positive gain for the people with whom you are meeting. Approaching a situation with the sole intent of trying to get a paid engagement from it is both rude behavior and a poor approach to the ethical treatment of professional relationships.

5. **Employees and contractors**. You will likely find yourself employing others, either as traditional employees or as contractors. The goals you set for yourself (independence, wealth, and so on) should be the goals you set for others. If you are engaged in lucrative work, those you bring to the table should also be rewarded and engaged in lucrative work. Treat your colleagues like you treat yourself, and you ensure they are going to benefit in many ways from working with you on your various projects. Be generous, pay well, and trust people to deliver at their greatest ability.

6. **Yourself**. Treat yourself equally well. Many people have no difficulty considering themselves first, but these people are bores and are troublesome to be around. Most professionals consider their clients first, often to their own detriment. Be ethical and kind to yourself or the system breaks down. Developers are notorious for "ghosting" hours, saying it took 40 hours to do something that actually took 100 hours. They want to stay on target and prove the task can be done within the limitations specified. The problem here is that no one will ever know the original estimate was grossly under budgeted, and there is no way to correct the inaccuracy the next time. Be honest with yourself, fair in the time you charge for, and fair in the amount of time you work. Many people who are self-employed are extremely unkind to themselves. One good test to determine whether you are being ethical to yourself is to look at what you require of yourself and ask whether this is how you would treat an employee. If the answer is no, you must change what you are doing.

The Ethics of Coding

There are four main ethical principles that relate to the delivery of technical architecture and development. These values include writing code that can be maintained and extended easily by someone else (coding for the next generation); ensuring you deliver code based on the priorities and requirements of the project, not on personal preferences (focusing on project and client priorities); delivering the best possible solution within the given circumstances (delivering the best possible solution); and working to provide clients with insights into how to make their solutions better and their business more effective—whether related directly to your immediate project or to the larger picture (being a strong communicator).

Coding for the Next Generation

Some of you may be familiar with the idea from the Constitution of the Iroquois Nation that "in every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation." Applying this maxim to coding means everything written should be done with the next person in mind. Unless you are planning on staying with a single company for years, it is guaranteed that someone else will come in and take over where you left off.

Anyone who has written a line of code has inherited a project from someone else. We all know the feeling of looking through a piece of work from those who had no idea what they were doing, and implemented something in such a way that the code has to be rewritten completely. We also know that we have written code that was handed off to someone else and should never have been written in the first place. As a professional, with experience behind you, always keep the next person in mind. Some of the basic ideas of coding for the next generation include the following:

1. **Write code and solutions simply**. There are many ways to write code, and your options change as your experience increases. However, in every situation and at every skill level on your journey, always work to deliver the most simple and well-thought-out code as possible. If a solution to a problem can be coded at the level of an elementary school student or at a PhD level, code at the elementary level. Thinking of the next person means writing at a level that can be understood easily by virtually anyone who picks it up. In general, business programming is about getting a solid solution in place, not about algorithms and efficiencies.

CASE STUDY

I was part of a large, 20+-person team tasked with developing a health-care based solution. The project we were brought in to work was extremely complex and consisted of a variety of cutting-edge technologies and software development kits (SDKs). I likened the solution to the temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia—incredibly intricate, artistic, and complex; the product of an extremely bright mind, but virtually unusable and unable to be maintained. The same solution could have been built by two or three people in a much more simplistic way, saving the client millions of dollars and reducing the delivery time drastically. The original architect of the solution had missed many of the fundamental requirements of an ethically responsible solution, and the company would pay for this mistake for a long time to come.

2. **Document code and solutions thoroughly**. Documentation is often an afterthought, and many times it is not even budgeted into a project. However, putting together simple design and architecture documents, and ensuring your code is documented inline requires little additional effort and should be part of every coder's deliverable. Taking a minute here and there to document what you are doing properly saves a great deal of time for the next person who has to work with your code, and helps minimize the chance that your well-designed and well-executed code won't be thrown out for a rewrite because no one was able to tell what it was doing.

3. **Target deliverables and architectures toward appropriate technologies and skill sets**. Write your solutions to use technologies that are well understood by as many technical resources as possible. When designing your solution for a specific client, first learn about who will be supporting it after you are gone. If their internal team is well skilled with SQL, but knows little about .NET, then build your solution in such a way that it uses database components and functionality rather than writing everything in compiled code. There are cases when you won't have an option in how you write the code, but the vast majority of situations allows for you to design and build solutions tailored toward a certain skill set and technology.

4. **Determine whether what you have written is something you could understand one year from now**. When you roll off a project, you generally immediately forget everything you did. As the weeks roll by, the memory fades. Six months later, a client calls and asks for a bug fix. It takes time to ramp back up, remember what you did, and address the issue. As you write your code, think to yourself: Will I be able to remember what I did here? Is there anything additional I can do to make this easier on myself when I have to revisit it? If you write code in such a way that makes it easy for you to maintain and remember, you make it just as easy for the next person to take it over.

Focusing on Project and Client Priorities

When you are hired by a company to architect and develop a system integration, it trusts you will build the most appropriate solution to match the situation. The priorities of the project are generally clear, but they always center around the betterment of the client, not around ulterior motives that individuals on the team may have in mind. Engaging ethically on a project means you place the client's best interests before your own. If there is work that needs to be done, that is the highest priority. If there is a critical bug that needs to be fixed that is holding up production, that is the highest priority item for you and it must be addressed.

Every client you have should be your top priority, and focusing on all of them at once is a necessity. No client should ever be aware of other work or other priorities you might have. You can do this with the appropriate equipment, skill, mind-set, and working environment, as long as you know how to manage time and as long as no single client abuses your availability.

■ **Rule**   Avoid excessive meetings. It is important to be available virtually any time someone needs you, so limit meetings to an hour or less, and always let your client know before the call that you have a hard stop at the end of the meeting. Be extremely efficient with your time. If one client consumes too much of your time, you are not being ethical to your other clients.

CASE STUDY

I was doing a code review of a product that a developer had recently written and released into production. The code was a custom application that was a core process and integral to the success of the client's product line. The application was massively over complex, and was something that no one other than the developer could ever work with. I asked the developer why he had done the code this way and his answer was "job security." His take was that if he designed something only he could work with, the client could never let him go. The only way that someone could take over this code in the future would be for the company to invest in a full rewrite of the solution. This kind of behavior is very common; people want to own their domain, and they often create (consciously or not) solutions that have been built in a highly unethical way. Deliver top-quality work and lay no claim to territory that others have paid you to develop.

Delivering the Best Possible Solution

You will likely find yourself supporting projects on which you are not the architect and don't have control over how a solution is implemented and supported. In this case, you are often working in a staff augmentation role, and are not considered for consulting or guidance. You may be required to write code that doesn't match what you consider to be good code or a well-designed solution. In cases when you find yourself required to build a solution with which you don't agree, you have two options:

1. **You can walk off the project**. In extremely rare situations, the architecture and solution are so poorly thought out there is nothing you can do to make progress. You will know this at the very beginning of a project, and you need to make a decision on whether you will engage before any real expenses have been incurred by the client. If you know the situation is hopeless—in general, because of lack of management—then it is your duty to let others know why you can't engage and then quickly excuse yourself. Be aware, however, that quitting a project hurts you and the client financially, and is an option that should be undertaken only at times when staying on would be in everyone's worst interest.

■ **Rule**   Always strive for the most correct action in a set of given circumstances. For example, assume you find yourself in a situation in which you have very limited time to complete a solution. Coding it by your standards may require two weeks of time, but you only have two days. The number one priority in this situation is to get the work done within the two days; therefore, the most correct action is to come up with an approach that solves the immediate business need.

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2. **You can express your concerns, use your expertise, and make changes where possible**—all while making progress with the core solution. This approach is sensible and models our situations in life. We live in an imperfect world and are able to make limited changes in this world. Taking this approach in your business life ensures you are constantly seeking to make the best changes the circumstances allow for any given context.

Being a Strong Communicator

The ability to communicate your status, your impressions of the project, and your perceptions and recommendations at a business level is a very important aspect of your overall capability to engage ethically on project. When you are working on a solution, you will be asked the status of the project, how close are you to being done. You must be able to state with clarity and precision the current status, the task on which you are working, any holdups you foresee, and what you need others to do to proceed. The ability to communicate your status clearly and effectively at all times is the most ethical skill and behavior you can have. Countless dollars and unimaginable time have been wasted because people are unable to communicate their status properly.

CASE STUDY

A colleague of mine from China was asked, as developers frequently are, how the project was coming along and what the status of his deliverables were. His response to each question about each specific deliverable was always, "Done." The project manager was pleased with the progress, and the meetings went on like this throughout the course of the three-month project. As the project neared the testing phase, this colleague was asked to move his solution to the quality assurance environment. He replied that it wasn't ready to test. Days went by, and the project manager began to get stressed and upset.

"You told us that this work was done! Why can't you roll it out to test?" he asked.

"In China, we have 30 words for 'done.' The code is 'done,' but it is not 'done done,'" my colleague responded.

In the end, we had to rewrite the code from scratch, because what had been written was neither "done" nor done properly.

Would a code review have helped here? Certainly. This is a perfect example of when a code review would have saved time and money. But the real thing that would have helped would have been professional communication. Knowing how to communicate your status effectively and accurately, regardless of the specific questions being asked, is key to being able to engage in an ethical way.

Dealing with Unethical People

You will meet, work with, and work for unethical people. Many people knowingly do what is wrong for their own gain or motivations; others do it unconsciously. The vast majority of people are simply playing out their lives and are directed, not by any true thought on their own part, but rather by the winds of ideas and incidents that occur all around them. "Man is asleep,"

said G.I. Gurdjieff as quoted by P. D. Ouspensky in *In Search of the Miraculous*. "Awakening is possible only for those who seek it and want it, for those who are ready to struggle with themselves and work on themselves for a very long time and very persistently to attain it."

Knowing that most of those around you are not fully conscious of themselves and their environment, and are acting at various levels of mechanical thought and motivation, is something you must accept in many situations. Often, you know the heart of people within the first few minutes of dealing with them. You have to make a decision from the start regarding whether you choose to engage in business with them. Individuals who show themselves to be foolish, cruel, deceiving, foul tempered, and mercurial during your initial encounter continue to be so in the future. You must consider all your dealings, deliverables, and interactions in relation to this knowledge and weigh the risks of engagement.

■ **Rule**   Thieves and liars can be charismatic and have enjoyable personalities. Be willing to see the true nature of the people with whom you are dealing, and make appropriate business decisions based on this understanding. If you rule out working or engaging with people with questionable attributes, your world would become very small very quickly.

At times, depending on goals, current work pipelines, finances, and other considerations, it may make sense to engage in risky projects with questionable people. The desire to help is deep within most of us, and knowing we can do the job being requested is often enough to make us want to help anyone who asks. Just make sure you work to assess the true character of people in the very beginning, and plan your work based on the known risks. You may be disappointed in the final outcome, but you won't ever be surprised.

CASE STUDY

Bill was the president of a company I worked with out of New Jersey. He was a man given to his passions, and his emotions were never controlled. I had been hired as the next in a long line of people to update his solution and add new functionality. The solution itself was complex in that there were no well-defined project requirements, but the real complexity was in the personality of Bill. I knew from the first day we met that he was going to be difficult to work with because of the way he talked about and treated people who had come before me. However, I had the skills to be able to help him and I felt that it was possible to make a positive impact through my involvement. There were several of us involved in this project, and I set the price structure at a level that would make the work worth the risk.

We worked with Bill throughout the course of a year. The tasks were getting done, and things in general were going well. Bill went out of his way to express his joy in our work and indicated how extremely happy he was about everything. Whenever he praised our efforts I cringed, because I knew that one day he would turn on me, just like he had on his previous vendors.

One day it happened. Something completely unrelated to the project happened to Bill (relationship? unexpected financial trouble? bad digestion?) and he directed his anger at me and my team. Within days I knew my project with him was over, but unfortunately he owed me about $25K in unpaid fees. Throughout the coming weeks, I tried to save the situation, largely to recoup the outstanding fees, but all my efforts were for naught. I was the ex-girlfriend and Bill had moved on to a new lover.

The project ended, I was out $25K, and I had experienced an excellent lesson in the ways of thieves and unethical people in business. However, ultimately I knew from the beginning that I was working with someone who would turn on me; I had weighed the risks and engaged knowing what would eventually happen.

Conclusion

James Allen in *As a Man Thinketh* states, "A man is literally what he thinks, his character being the complete sum of all his thoughts." Ultimately, you must be thoughtful in all interactions. What you do in your personal life affects your business life. What you do in your code affects current solutions and future developers. Acting honestly in private matters brings honesty to your business. Writing solid code and communicating your status accurately have positive impacts on those working with you and on those for whom you work. If you are serious about your pursuit of wealth and independence, be ethical in the way you live, the activities you pursue, and the way you interact with people.