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Doing what's right keeps firms thriving

The corporate scandals we've been living through underscore that business needs leaders at all levels who are willing to take a stand — in public, if necessary — for what is right, even at the risk of their own jobs. It's yet another demand put on managers and supervisors today, many of whom already are under inordinate pressure to do better this quarter than last.



Commentary

By Mary-Frances Winters

We need to rethink the meaning of business success. Maybe it is not all about beating Wall Street earnings projections and year-to-year double-digit profit increases. Maybe the means really should be just as important as the end. Maybe doing the right thing, in the long run, is what keeps companies in business.

Only a small fraction of American business leaders are unethical, but they're the ones in the news. We should hear more about the many leaders who stand for what is right, such as:

► Truett Cathy, founder and chairman of the privately owned Chick-fil-A chain, runs a thriving business with an official corporate purpose that includes having "a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A" — among them its own employees, which is why the restaurants close on Sundays.

► JetBlue Airways CEO David Neeleman focuses on "bringing humanity back to air travel" through a new airline culture built on low fares and great service.

► Chairman and CEO John Rogers Jr. wrote Ariel Mutual Funds shareholders that "slow and steady wins the race" in volatile times and that "old-fashioned stocks may not be glamorous, but we believe they are excellent businesses."

These are the kinds of values, philosophies and people that sustain America — the kinds all of us in business need to emulate.

Politicians can't legislate integrity, values and high morals; they are formed early in life and are not easily changed. But top business leaders can turn the devastating corporate scandals into long-term positives by nurturing courageous leaders at all levels who are not afraid to challenge the values and ethics of those above and below them.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world," anthropologist Margaret Meade said. "Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has!"

Mary-Frances Winters is author of Only Wet Babies Like Change: Workplace Wisdom for Baby Boomers.