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A Conversation with Psychologist Howard Gardner

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DIFFERENT VOICE

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If you're running a large company, don't expect the public to like you. Soaring executive pay packages, continuing rounds of layoffs, and the memory of ethical failures at firms like Enron, World-Com, and Hewlett-Packard have raised public animosity toward corporate executives as never before. A U.S. Roper poll conducted in 2005 revealed that 72% of respondents believed wrongdoing was widespread in industry. Only 2% felt that leaders of large firms were "very trustworthy" (a drop from 3% in 2004), and the pattern is "not improving," according to Kathy Sheehan, a senior vice president at GFK Roper Consulting in New York. Meanwhile, the public increasingly demands that companies take better care of their employees, communities, and the environment.

It is now, more than ever, incumbent on business leaders to repair relations with customers and employees by stepping up to the ethical plate, says Howard Gardner, the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gardner is an influential cognitive and educational psycholo-

gist, not an ethicist per se. But as a psychologist, he believes that his first responsibility is to understand how moral and ethical capacities develop, or fail to develop. His reflection on ethical issues has deep underpinnings and a very long reach. In the seminal 1983 book *Frames of Mind,* he put forth his theory that individuals possess not one but multiple varieties of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. The theory, which Gardner continues to refine, has found broad acceptance in the educational community, and teachers around the globe tailor their lessons to the different kinds of intelligence.

Gardner became personally embroiled in ethical issues when he observed how his ideas were being adopted by educators: Some schools and policy makers claimed that certain racial and ethnic groups were lacking specific intelligences. As the founder of the theory, he felt an obligation to denounce such distorted interpretations of his work. Later, when he taught a course at Harvard called "Mind, Brain, and Education," he found himself thinking about ethical dilemmas, such as

those involved in brain and genetic testing and whether it's wise to share troubling test results with parents, particularly when no proven intervention exists.

Gardner's core insights into the ethical mind come from more than a dozen years of studying working professionals. Since 1995, he and teams of investigators at four universities have been researching the ways in which people aspire to do good work—that is, work of high quality that matters to society, enhances the lives of others, and is conducted in an ethical manner. The researchers have also observed firsthand the ways in which good work is eroded by cultural, economic, and technological forces. (For more on this long-term project, go to www.goodworkproject.com.) In his new book, *Five Minds for the Future* (forthcoming from Harvard Business School Press in 2007), Gardner cogitates on what it takes to develop an ethical mind-set. In this edited interview with senior editor Bronwyn Fryer, Gardner offers his thoughts about what managers must do to develop and maintain high standards for themselves and their organizations.

What is an ethical mind?
In thinking of the mind as a set of cognitive capacities, it helps to distinguish the ethical mind from the other four minds that we particularly need to cultivate if we are to thrive as individuals, as a community, and as the human race. The first of these, the disciplined mind, is what we gain through applying ourselves in a disciplined way in school. Over time, and with sufficient training, we gain expertise in one or more fields: We become experts in project management, accounting, music, dentistry, and so forth. A second kind of mind is the synthesizing mind, which can survey a wide range of sources, decide what is important and worth paying attention to, and weave this information together in a coherent fashion for oneself and others. [For more on the synthesizing mind, see "The HBR List: Breakthrough Ideas for 2006" (February 2006).] A third mind, the creating mind, casts about for new ideas and practices, innovates, takes chances, discovers. While each of these minds has long been valuable, all of them are essential in an era when we are deluged by information and when anything that can be automated will be.

Yet another kind of mind, less purely cognitive in flavor than the first three, is the respectful mind: the kind of open mind that tries to understand and form relationships with other human beings. A person with a respectful mind enjoys being exposed to different types of people. While not forgiving of all, she gives others the benefit of the doubt.

An ethical mind broadens respect for others into something more abstract. A person with an ethical mind asks herself, "What kind of a person, worker, and citizen do I want to be? If all workers in my profession adopted the mind-set I have, or if everyone did what I do, what would the world be like?"

It's important to clarify the distinction between the respectful and the ethical mind, because we assume that one who is respectful is ethical and vice versa. I think you can be respectful without understanding why: As a child, you might have respected your parents and grandparents because you were taught to. But ethical conceptions and behaviors demand a certain capacity to go beyond your own experience as an individual person. Once you have developed an ethical mind, you become more like an impartial spectator of the team, the organization, the citizenry, the world. And you may have to sacrifice respect for another person if your role as a citizen or worker calls on you to do damage control to protect an idea or institution you believe in.

Whistle-blowers display ethical minds. Many people might see a top manager doing something unethical, but they won't do anything about it because they want to keep their jobs, and they feel that they must respect the boss. A whistle-blower steps back from those concerns and considers the nature of work and the community in a larger way. He takes a mental leap past daily doings; his allegiance is to the workplace or the profession. He acts ethically even though it may cost him his respectful relation to his supervisor and, ultimately, his job and relation to his colleagues. He is able to do this because his own momentary well-being is less important than the broader mission he has endorsed.

It sounds as if the ethical mind is fundamentally more community focused than any of the other four minds. If that's true, then how does the ethical mind develop?
An ethical orientation begins at home, where children see whether their parents take pride in their work, whether they "play fair," whether they give the benefit of the doubt or are closed

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minded, and so on. Children absorb their parents' religious and political values. As children get older, their peers have an enormous effect, especially in America. Just as influential is the behavior of the surrounding community toward its citizens. Are young and old people cared for? Beyond the necessary services, are there cultural and social events to learn from and participate in? Do parents take part in these "gluing" activities and expect their children to do the same?

My favorite example of an ethical community is a small city called Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. Aside from providing high-quality services and cultural benefits to its citizens, the city provides excellent infant and toddler centers and preschools. Children feel cared for by the community. So when they grow up, they return this regard by caring for others. They become good workers and good citizens. The tone has already been set at such a high level that one rarely encounters compromised—that is, qualitatively or ethically sullied—work. And in such cases, the ethical action taken by the community is to ostracize the compromised worker (in effect, if not by law) so he does not undermine community mores. This stance works as long as everyone sees that everyone wins.

What gets in the way of the ethical mind?
Sadly, even if you grow up with a strong ethical sense, the bad behavior of others can undermine it. A study conducted by Duke University recently found that 56% of students in the United States pursuing a master's degree in business administration admit to cheating—the highest rate of cheating among graduate student groups. If you are a very ambitious MBA student and the people around you are cheating on their exams, you may assume that cheating is the price of success, or maybe you do it because "everyone does it." You might even come to think of ethical behavior as a luxury. A study we published in 2004 found that although young professionals declared an understanding of and a desire to do good work, they felt that they had to succeed by whatever means. When they had made their mark, they told us, they would *then* become exemplary workers.

As young people go into business today, the temptation to skirt ethics is mounting. We live in a time of intense pressure on individuals and organizations to cut corners, pursue their own interests, and forget about the effect of their behavior on others. Additionally, many businesspeople have internalized Milton Friedman's belief that if we let people pursue their interests and allow the processes of the marketplace to operate freely, positive moral and ethical consequences will magically follow. I am not one to question the power and benefits of the marketplace in any absolute sense. But markets are amoral; the line between shading earnings and committing outright fraud is not always clear. The chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, said it well: "When everything that matters can be bought and sold, when commitments can be broken because they are no longer to our advantage, when shopping becomes salvation and advertising slogans become our litany, when our worth is measured by how much we earn and spend, then the market is destroying the very virtues on which in the long run it depends." Confidence in business is undermined; individuals distrust one another. Reggio Emilia seems light-years away.

Do you think it's more difficult for businesspeople to adhere to an ethical mind than it is for other professionals?
Yes, because strictly speaking, business is not—nor has it ever been—a profession. Professions develop over long periods of time and gradually establish a set of control mechanisms and sanctions for those who violate the code. True professionals, from doctors and lawyers to engineers and architects, undergo extensive training and earn a license. If they do not act according to recognized standards, they can be expelled from their professional guild. In addition, mentoring is an understood component of regulated professions: A medical intern works with head residents or senior physicians who serve, in part, as ethical guides. But business lacks this model; you don't need a license to practice. The only requirements are to make money and not run afoul of the law. Even if you start out with high personal ethical standards, it's easy to wander off the proper path, because professional standards are a vocational option, not part of the territory. Certainly, there are businesspeople who act professionally, who feel obligated to serve their customers and employees and communities. Businesses can also voluntarily take on corporate social responsibility. But there are no penalties if they elect not to. And some economists argue that it is illegitimate for businesses to direct profits toward

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anything other than shareholders.

Would you say that compromised work is catching—in the same way that the emotional state of a leader affects others, as Daniel Goleman has observed?

Employees certainly listen to what their leaders say, and they watch what their leaders and colleagues do even more carefully. Employees feel psychologically emboldened or pressured to emulate the bad behavior they see in leaders and others who "get away with it." Alternatively, leaders who model ethical behavior, especially in spite of the temptations of the market, inspire employees to do likewise and thus win for their firms in the long run. Though hoary, the example of CEO James Burke of Johnson & Johnson is still useful. When Burke immediately recalled all Tylenol products during the scare in the 1980s, he exemplified what it is to be ethical in the face of odds. In the end, his company benefited: Twenty-five years later, Johnson & Johnson is rated in the top spot for corporate reputation among large companies.

It matters enormously whether the various interest groups with a stake in the work are in harmony or in conflict and whether the particular role models are confident about the hats they are wearing. When everyone is focused on the same thing, it's easier to do good work. For example, in the late 1990s, our studies found that geneticists in the United States had a relatively easy time pursuing good work because everyone was focused on the same ends of better health and longer life. We found that journalists had a harder time pursuing good work because their desire to report objectively on the most important events clashed with the public's desire for sensationalism and the pressure from publishers to generate advertising dollars and avoid controversy.

Then the real test of an individual's—or a company's—ethical fiber is what happens when there are potent pressures. How does one stand up to those pressures?

Well, if you are a leader, the best way for you to retain an ethical compass is to believe doing so is essential for the good of your organization. What are you trying to achieve? What are your goals, in the broad sense of doing good in the world? Once you understand these factors, you must state your beliefs unwaveringly from the first and tie rewards and sanctions to their realization.

When everything is going swimmingly, it is easier to hold yourself and others to high standards—the costs are not evident. But when circumstances are tempting you to drop your standards, you have to practice rigorous self-honesty. Being ethical really means not fooling yourself or others. I recommend that you look in the mirror from time to time, without squinting, and ask yourself if you are proceeding in ways you approve of. The questions to pose are "Am I being a good worker? And if not, what can I do to become one?"

I also believe that individuals increase their chances of carrying out good work when they make the time and take the opportunity to reflect on their broadly formulated mission and determine whether they are progressing toward its realization. There's a great story—possibly apocryphal—about James Bryant Conant, the former president of Harvard. When he was offered the presidency, he said, "I'm happy to take it, but I can't come to work on Wednesdays, because I have to go to Washington." The hiring committee agreed to this condition. In fact, Conant didn't go to Washington on Wednesdays; he just took the time to be quiet and read. He felt he needed a day each week to be alone with his thoughts. All executives ought to be able to step back and reflect and think about the nature of their work, develop new work projects, or solve work problems.

Another way to keep yourself on the ethical path is to undergo what I call "positive periodic inoculations." These happen when you meet individuals or have experiences that force you to examine what you're doing or to set a good example for others. A businessperson might be inoculated by the model of Aaron Feuerstein, the owner of Malden Mills, who kept paying his workers even after the mills burned down. Feuerstein's action might inspire a leader to do something beneficial for employees, like give them an opportunity to acquire a desired skill. Another kind of inoculation—call it an "antiviral" one—allows you to draw object lessons from instances of compromised work. When Arthur Andersen went bankrupt following the Enron scandal, for example, auditors at other firms took a hard look at their own practices.

But we're all subject to self-delusion. Certainly, one needs a more objective gauge than oneself.

Yes, and that's why it's important that other

knowledgeable and candid individuals be consulted. Two worthy consultants could be your own mother—"If she knew everything I was doing, what would she think?"—and the press. Michael Hackworth, the cofounder and chairman of Cirrus Logic, uses this personal temperature gauge: He insists that he will not do something that would embarrass him if it were printed in the morning paper. Even if the stock drops temporarily, he knows that his honesty with the mirror builds his credibility in the long run.

Ideally, business leaders ought to have three types of counselors who are prepared to speak truth to their power. First, they need a trusted adviser within the organization. Second, they need the counsel of someone completely outside the organization, preferably an old friend who is a peer. Third, they need a genuinely independent board. If you actually listen to these three sources of information and act on the basis of what they say, then you cannot go too far wrong. George W. Bush is an example of a leader who has lacked—or at least disregarded—this kind of frank feedback. Franklin D. Roosevelt sought it regularly and was a far more effective president.

In hiring or promotion, are there ways companies can sort the wheat from the chaff?

It would be much wiser to admit people to business school who would never consider cheating—and there are some people like that—than to hope that at age 30, when they're on the make, slippery characters can suddenly be converted into responsible paragons. That said, there is no substitute for detailed, textured, confidential oral recommendations from individuals who know the candidates well and will be honest. I don't particularly trust written letters or the results of psychological tests. A single interview is not much help, either. A colleague of mine says "It takes ten lunches," and I think there is truth in that.

I might also ask a young person about mentors. Our studies found that, across the board, many young professionals lack deep mentoring from individuals in authoritative positions. This was in contrast to veteran professionals, who spoke about important mentors and role models. So I might ask, "Who influenced you in cultivating a particular moral climate, and why?" The influence of antimentors—potential role models who had been unkind to their employees or who had shown behavior that

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others would not want to emulate—and a lack of mentors is something that we underestimated in our studies. Negative role models may be more powerful than is usually acknowledged. Of course, one has to listen carefully to which traits are considered to be positive and which ones are critiqued. Sometimes the responses are surprising.

What if you are in a position to speak truth to power? How do you gird yourself for that task?

With the assumption of authority and maturity comes the obligation to monitor what our peers are doing and, when necessary, to call them to account. As the seventeenth-century French playwright Jean-Baptiste Molière declared, "It is not only for what we do that we are held responsible but for what we do not do."

It is not easy to confront offending individuals. But it is essential if you want to have an effective organization, be it a family or a *Fortune* 500 company. Two factors make it easier. First, you need a firm belief that what you are doing is right for the organization. Second, you don't wait for egregious behavior. As soon as you—or others—see warning signs, you confront them, not in an accusatory fashion but in a fact-finding mode. If a person has been warned or counseled, it is much easier to take action the next time a wrong is identified.

As for confronting superiors, if that is impossible, you are not in the right organization. Of course, it is helpful to consult with others, to make sure that your perceptions are not aberrant. But if you are not prepared to resign or be fired for what you believe in, then you are not a worker, let alone a professional. You are a slave. Happily, in the United States, at least, most people have some options about where they work.

In the end, you need to decide which side you're on. There are so many ways in which the world could spiral either up toward health and a decent life for all or down into poverty, disease, ecological disaster—even nuclear warfare. If you are in a position to help tip the balance, you owe it to yourself, to your progeny, to your employees, to your community, and to the planet to do the right thing.

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