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# In Search of a Corporate Moral Compass

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# In Search of a Corporate Moral Compass

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Marvin T. Brown's latest book, *Corporate Integrity: Rethinking Organizational Ethics and Leadership*, provides a fresh, integrative approach to business ethics. Not only does Brown show us what organizations look like when they have corporate integrity, he demonstrates how organizations can create that integrity. Brown explores the ethical challenges facing corporations today from a civic perspective that emphasizes the importance of relations and patterns of communication. The core of his argument revolves around five dimensions of corporate integrity and the particular challenges each presents to achieving that integrity.

Although the media are not the primary focus of his book, Brown's ideas regarding organizational relations and patterns of communication are significant for communication scholars and students who cannot ignore the ethical challenges that frequently stem from sweeping changes in media ownership. Media have become big businesses. As Tom Bivins said in *Mixed Media* (2004), newspapers are owned by conglomerates; public relations and advertising agencies are often partners under the same owners; the entertainment function now overrides the information function of news; and decision making across the media is becoming attenuated with accountability spread

thin throughout large and complex organizations. Therefore, media professionals often find themselves enmeshed in corporate cultures that fuel ethical dilemmas; it therefore becomes easy for these practitioners to abdicate ethical responsibility. Because organizational policies and practices can lead to unethical behavior on the part of individuals, professionals in all fields, including the media, need to understand the value of corporate integrity.

According to Brown, two paradoxical sides of the contemporary corporate story—rampant corporate scandals and increased discourse about ethics, social responsibility, and citizenship—have created the ideal context for rethinking organizational ethics and leadership. Because corporate stories are multidimensional, Brown insists that we expand our focus beyond individuals. Therefore, *Corporate Integrity* analyzes corporations from a holistic approach that incorporates the cultural, interpersonal, organizational, civic, and environmental dimensions of corporate life. Integrity can and should be the shared standard for corporate conduct, Brown maintains, because corporations with integrity can be trusted. With growing concerns over media credibility—particularly the diminishing amount of trust the public is willing to place in the media—Brown's approach, again, seems relevant and fitting for media corporations.

Brown lays the foundation for his argument in chapter 1 by providing a context for corporate integrity, which he says not only requires wholeness but also the right relations among the parts of the whole. "The relationships between the parts and the whole offer various meanings of integrity, including integrity as consistency, as relational awareness, as inclusion, and as pursuing a worthwhile purpose" (p. 5).

For Brown, the relational meaning is the most significant because corporations consist of multiple relations that occur in the five dimensions of corporate life: the cultural, interpersonal, organizational, civic, and natural. Each of these dimensions acts to either hinder or enhance corporate integrity, which only becomes apparent "when people practice openness, provide safety, voice their concerns, refer to worthwhile purposes, cooperate with others, and include nature in their strategic plans" (p. 225).

After setting the context, Brown tackles the five key challenges facing businesses. In chapter 2, he uses W. Barnett Pearce's typology of communicative cultures, Martin Buber's conception of dialogue, and Lorenzo Simpson's analysis of modern technology to explain cultural integrity as openness. Brown draws on feminist ethics, organizational communication theory, and political philosophy in the third chapter to demonstrate how conversations at work should be designed so that interpersonal relationships have integrity. Chapter 4 addresses organizational integrity as a worthwhile purpose, asking: Why do corporations exist and what are they good for? This chapter is especially useful for mass media scholars and students because it challenges them to think about the fundamental purpose of media. In chapter 5, Brown claims that the basis for civic cooperation is not citizenship but corporate integrity. He argues, "For corporations to exist in civil society, in other words, they must participate in cosmopolitan conversations that facilitate openness to differences and disagreements, and from these conversations learn how to be a part of a larger context" (p. 161). The environment is the final dimension of corporate integrity, and Brown challenges readers to recognize the connection between civil society and nature.

The last chapter reiterates the links between the five dimensions of corporate life and proposes how to begin designing conversations that promote integrity. Brown urges leaders to use dialogue in their organizational practices, which acknowledges the value of different resources and different participants. As a result, leaders facilitate the development of corporate integrity through their communicative relations. This chapter would fit particularly well in a mass media course because it demonstrates the value of organizational leadership to corporate integrity and helps prompt discussions about how media practitioners can work toward creating that integrity in their organizations.

The best thing about Brown's approach is that he does not inundate us with philosophical theory; instead, he consciously connects the philosophical roots of his argument with contemporary examples from global corporations and international agencies. For instance, he refers to Johnson and Johnson's credo as a model for responsible management, the United Nations's conversations on sustainability as a case that lacks international support, and Fetzer

Vineyards's mission statement as "a great example of the power of a strong purpose to increase the integrity of all dimensions of a corporation's life" (p. 207). Because public relations practitioners play an integral role in the development and implementation of such corporate policies and statements, Brown's approach enables students to see how their work can help create corporate integrity.

One of the book's strengths might also be one of its weaknesses, depending on the intended audience. Throughout the text, Brown asks readers to reflect on their own professional experiences and apply the proposed strategies. Every chapter concludes with a section called "From theory to practice," which includes a series of questions for reflection and dialogue. Moreover, the appendix contains worksheets for facilitating the exploration of existing patterns of communication and for developing strategies to improve them. Therefore, *Corporate Integrity* is most appropriate for professional masters students who have had at least a few years of experience in organizational settings or who are currently engaged in a professional field. Although the book could be used as a supplementary reader for a senior seminar in ethics, media management, or public relations, Brown's attempts to engage readers might be fruitless if students lack any substantive professional experience.

## References

Bivins, T. (2004). *Mixed media: Moral distinctions in advertising, public relations, and journalism*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.