

Curtis C. Verschoor, CMA, Editor

# More Than 100 | BY CURTIS C. VERSCHOOR

It's hard to believe that it has been well over eight years since Editor-in-Chief Kathy Williams and I had a brief conversation about writing or editing a monthly column for *Strategic Finance* on the broad subject of business ethics. Earlier, in April 1999, I had written a

short article for her that described an Institute of Management Accountants (IMA®) helpline conversation I had with an IMA member. At the time, volunteers like me fielded calls and provided anonymous assistance in resolving ethical dilemmas. That fall, Kathy agreed to make space available for an ethics article every month. From then on, an unbroken string of 104 consecutive monthly columns has appeared, the vast majority written by me.

IMA is to be commended for its continuing advocacy of the highest ethical and professional standards. This encourages organizations and individuals in the management accounting profession to adopt, promote, and execute business practices consistent with high ethical standards. An important objective of these columns has been emphasis on the IMA Code of Conduct, now the

IMA *Statement of Ethical Professional Practice*. Future columns will include reminders to readers around the world of the benefits available without cost from using the IMA Ethics Helpline. This service provides guidance to those in the profession who find themselves facing an ethical dilemma. In the U.S. and Canada, just dial 1 (800) 245-1383. From other countries, first dial the AT&T USADirect® access number for your country, obtainable on the AT&T website ([www.usa.att.com/traveler](http://www.usa.att.com/traveler)).

When I began this writing endeavor, I certainly didn't set a goal of publishing a column each and every single month. As a matter of fact, I find that 30 days and a new deadline for copy come around very quickly. And important to the success of the column has been the patience and hard work of *Strategic Finance's* very talented associate edi-

tor, Christopher Dowsett. He has improved the readability and organization of almost every column, and I'm grateful for his help. I also greatly appreciate the encouragement I receive from readers, especially when they agree with the point of view I expressed. I respect the views of the few dissenters, and I have learned to steer away from topics that some might believe are political in nature. Especially heart-warming was the news that the 2007 survey of readers indicated the ethics column was the consistent favorite among all of the columns presented in the magazine.

Would there have been enough developments in the field of business ethics to write about every month if Enron had never happened? I believe the answer is a resounding "Yes." Although Enron is the most notorious example of a company without ethics, there have been many others. Aside from Enron, the names of (in alphabetical order) AIG, BP, Ford/Firestone, Schering-Plough, Siemens, Sunbeam, and Tyco have appeared in the title of a column over the years. And the activities of other companies have been mentioned in the columns themselves, particularly those in the pharmaceu-

tical industry. I strongly believe that the business model of that industry, with its emphasis on developing me-too drugs for blockbuster-level diseases and then promoting them at very high cost, is incompatible with long-term financing of the cost of healthcare by business.

Other columns have given readers greater insight into ethical issues of the day, such as the subprime mortgage crisis, transgressions in various organizations, whistleblowing, the options backdating scandal, organizational DNA, and pronouncements by regulators and others that had ethical overtones. Columns have provided readers with the results of research studies on ethical issues and the current state of ethics in business. I believe that awareness of the need for improving ethics and examples of best practices should result in their becoming more widely used. Suggestions for improving the ethical culture in reader organizations have been presented in terms of: “Five Levees for Improving Ethical Performance,” “Eight Healthy Traits of a Healthy Organization,” “Nine Reasons to Be Ethical,” and “10 Steps to an Effective Ethics and Compliance Program.”

Many other columns expressed the benefits of having a strong ethical culture without having a number in the title. Research showing that more responsible and ethical corporations have superior financial performance is another recurring theme, as has been discussion of the place that collegiate business education has in the development of the ethical culture in business organizations. I believe that today’s graduates are looking to join an organization with a strong ethical culture and are disappointed when recruiters seem to pay so little attention to charac-

teristics of integrity and ethical values in the hiring process.

A very interesting response to the column “Who Is Responsible for College Students Cheating?” was provided by Susan Mullis, who is the regional controller of Standard Register. She finds a need to start ethics awareness much earlier in life, writing:

*I see a decline in ethics and civil behavior everywhere.*

*I fully believe it began in the era of Dr. Benjamin Spock’s day of raising a child with no parental corporal discipline, of placing a child in “time out” or trying to reason with a two-year-old throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of the grocery store. It progressed through the early school years with our removing any power to discipline a child or hold them back a grade if they don’t pass the minimum requirements. We moved away from rigid classroom rules; from memorization of fundamental facts and figures; and from any mention of ethics, morality, or values in schools. We moved to the days of saying “good job” so much that it has become meaningless, all in an effort to preserve the child’s sense of self-worth (without their learning that they have to earn that “sense of self” by actually doing something).*

*In addition to all of this touchy-feely pablum we call education, we also allow our children to demand things—they don’t know the difference between “wanting” and “needing”; and because we parents are absent in the pursuit of work, we replace our presence with cash so the child can buy yet another video game, piece of bling, or anything else their heart desires. They grow up without having to earn anything, without being held accountable for anything, and not knowing how to work up a*

*sweat. They are the elite and are “suffering” hours in the classroom, so they deserve big allowances and rest after their long day at that big, bad schoolhouse.*

*Then they hit either college or the work world.... What a rude awakening!!*

*I see a lack of basic skills coming into the workplace—the ability to think for yourself, the ability to reason through and find solutions, the basic skills of math, English, reading comprehension—all are lacking, and it’s not only the school systems but also our lack of parenting. We place children in front of TVs and video games, and they derive their sense of ethics and morals from trash. Shame on us.*

*Kids need equipment to play with. Kids need a parent or parents to say “NO” and mean it. Kids need a safe haven when necessary and a swift kick in the seat of the pants if warranted. Parents need to back up teachers and schools, and, if the child fails a grade, they’re held back until they learn what is necessary for the next step. We need to quit being so overly concerned about violating someone’s civil liberties and go back to teaching the “three Rs” with a healthy dose of ethics and morality from preschool on.*

While her response wasn’t focused on the subject of cheating, Ms. Mullis told me later that this particular column touched a nerve of frustration with the qualities displayed by most of the people she interviews for a position. Perhaps your perspective on the cause of the current lower standards of accomplishment and ethical values may differ somewhat from hers, but I think many of us would agree she has some valid points.

In contrast to the good feelings I get after reading favorable reader responses is the disappointment I

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feel in seeing my work being offered for sale to college students for use as term papers. This includes the “custom-written” or nonplagiarized term papers available on hundreds of websites that say they have used existing works (perhaps without proper citation) to satisfy the needs of tens of thousands of students. For example, [www.FratFiles.com](http://www.FratFiles.com) has “thousands of essays and term papers.” And [www.Cheathouse.com](http://www.Cheathouse.com) says its secret is “When you cite, you don’t cheat!” Meanwhile, [www.EssayTown.com](http://www.EssayTown.com) boasts that one of its papers “passed through Turnitin undetected.”

In summary, if you have any suggestions on how to help turn around what seems to be an unending trend toward lower ethical standards in business as well as in society, please let me know. ■

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