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Prelude: Blueprint, Toolbox, & Manifesto

Executive Summary

For all super-busy, on-the-fly business leaders and managers, I have provided a one-paragraph executive summary at the head of each of the seven chapters, the Prelude, Interlude, and Postlude of It’s About Excellence. If you don’t have time to read the whole book right now, then browse through it and read these summaries to get the basic message. Then keep the book close at hand so you can come back and get the substance beneath the surface. The devil really is in the details when it comes to building ethically-healthy organizations. So keep it close by for future reference---or give it to a colleague who can take on the detailed study, planning, and execution for your organization.

The Prelude that follows describes briefly the purpose, orientation, structure, and flow of It’s About Excellence.

It’s About Excellence provides a practical, concise, and well-tested blueprint for building companies¹ that are both ethical and excellent, that do right as well as do well. It is also a veritable toolbox---full of action plans, analytical charts, ethics audits, and how-to ideas. Finally, though, it is a manifesto---not a dispassionate, soulless, philosophical treatise but a call to action. Good business is good for everyone. More good business means more good jobs, reduced unemployment, more opportunities for creativity, meaning, achievement, and personal pride. The ripple effects of good business are a wonderful thing. Lack of good work has a terrible fall-out in terms of crime, family breakdown, personal discouragement, and even despair. So consider this book a call to entrepreneurship and business development.

Calling for more business development, of course, has its risks in our era of daily business scandals and outrages. Frankly, there is a deep corruption in parts of our business world today. I don’t think that the majority of businesses and their leaders are unethical---but neither is it a matter of a just few isolated instances, a few “bad apples.” No doubt that every day countless businesses open their doors to employees who will find good and satisfying work, customers who will appreciate the products and services they buy, and investors pleased with their returns. But also every day the business news reports another story of drugs rushed to market with questionable safety test results, a major default on long standing pension benefit commitments to workers, a refusal of a corporate board to listen to shareholder protests, a boatload of cash and stock for some CEO whose performance ranges from average to negative, or something equally troubling. Every day there’s some story like this. The ethics problem in business is not just a matter of theft, sexual harassment, and irresponsibility on the part of employees. From the very top on down, greed and moral blindness can sometimes look like an epidemic out of control.

This cannot continue. History is replete with lessons about aristocracies and oligarchies which pushed the envelope too far, too long. Locally and globally, the chickens will of necessity come home to roost. Investors, employees, customers, and citizens will eventually rebel. We must reform now or face a rebellion later, take the initiative now or experience the initiative of a radical opposition later. Never has the business landscape been so in need of more good leadership. So consider this book a call to ethical leadership in the business domain.

Despite this opening mini-rant, however, It’s About Excellence is not a fundamentally negative or reactive treatise. The answer to unethical business is not to become an expert in malfeasance and in techniques of blame and denunciation. Rather, it is to get creative, positive, and proactive. A major theme of the book is that business and organizational ethics has far too often been practiced as a kind of “damage control.” Headline, brand-reputation-threatening crises have too often been allowed to set the business ethics agenda both in companies and in business

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¹ My primary concern is with for-profit businesses---small, medium, or large---anywhere in today's global marketplace. But when reference is made to “businesses,” “organizations,” and “companies” the lessons almost always apply equally well to non-profit organizations (including schools and churches) and government agencies. In fact, even neighborhoods, families, and other social groups can be helped by the “mission-control” blueprint.

It’s About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations © David W. Gill
schools. But if ethics is little more than an “emergency service” to contain damage and assign blame after the fact, we will never make real progress in addressing the causes and conditions of such crises.

This book is about a better, more proactive, way. Ethics is first and foremost about excellence. I am not alone in arguing that doing right and doing well, ethics and excellence, are intimately related. No doubt, there are exceptions where good ethics is accompanied by business failure—and where bad ethics is accompanied by apparent business success. There can be no guarantees in these matters but most of the time, especially in the long term, sound ethics is a key factor in achieving and maintaining successful for-profit and non-profit organizations. This book explains how it works—and what you can do as a manager/leader to strengthen your company.

Here is the basic plan of attack:

Chapter One cuts to the chase with a clear working definition of “ethics”—“right and wrong”—for the business context. We certainly want to learn, on this topic, from the great moral philosophers and ethics teachers through history but our interest is not in ivory tower debates or abstract, technical jargon. Let’s get our definitions and starting points right and then let’s hit the ground. Since we carry out our business in diverse, even global contexts these days, it is essential to find a share-able, common way we can follow together, to figure out what is right. I propose six basic common grounds to guide us toward what’s ethically right.

Chapter Two is about motivation. Why should we care about and pursue the right thing in business? If we, with our workforce, our board, and our colleagues, are not adequately motivated, nothing—NOTHING—is going to change. We will explore “Twelve Good Reasons to Run a Business in an Ethical Manner.” Most of these reasons provide a common sense business case for being ethical. At the end of this chapter, we will also ask what has motivated some business leaders to be unethical—to cut ethical corners and get themselves and their companies into serious trouble. Why would they risk it? Part of it is “greed,” one of the most popular of the classic “Seven Deadly Sins,” but it is more complex than that, as we will see.

Chapter Three is about decision-making, trouble-shooting, and crisis management—“ethical ER,” I call it. While I often criticize business ethics approaches that are nothing more than damage control, the fact is that our organizations must know how to recognize and resolve ethical dilemmas and crises when they arise. I’d prefer to make this chapter an Appendix at the end, included just in case some unexpected problems arise. But the reality is that our organizational “boats” are often already leaking as we take over the captain’s post. So right away we must put in place, and into action, a patch and repair process so that we don’t sink before our larger, more positive, remodeling project can be carried out.

After Chapter Three I have a brief “interlude” (hence a “prelude” here and a “postlude” at the end). The Interlude is an explanation of the transition from the problem orientation of the first chapters to the proactive building orientation in the remaining chapters.

Chapter Four is about phase one of a three-phase blueprint for building ethically-healthy, excellent companies. How can we build or rebuild the business “boat” so it is seaworthy and less prone to spring leaks or run aground? Answer: If we want to build ethical, excellent organizations, our mantra must be: “First, get the mission straight.” What is our purpose (or “End” as the classical thinkers would say)? What is our “envisioned future”? Where do we want to go? What do we want to accomplish? It is this fundamental choice that, more than any other single factor, leverages (and specifies) the quality of the ethics and the level of the excellence in an organization. We are going to call this “mission-control ethics” (replacing the usual “damage-control” approach).

Chapter Five is about figuring out the core values that are essential to guiding and enabling the achievement of the organizational mission and fulfilling the vision. And after we figure out these core values, how do we practically, effectively embed them in every part of the corporate culture, from our architecture and physical equipment to our policies and systems to the personnel we hire to our company rituals and atmosphere? It’s all about what kind of organization we are—our corporate character and culture. It’s about building our capability of carrying out and fulfilling our mission and vision. I call this “building ethical muscle” in our organization. We won’t be able to “lift the weight” without it, no matter how good our intentions.

It’s About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations © David W. Gill
Chapter Six is about our organizational practices—the things we do, the ways we spend our time and effort in pursuit of our vision and mission. Here is the distinction I am making: our culture is about who and what we are, about our capabilities; our practices, then, are about what we do, about our activities. After mapping out these practices, the essential activities of our company, we then figure out, articulate, and disseminate our basic guidelines (“principles,” we will often call them) for “how we do the things we do.” This is where we call on our people to join together to write (and regularly update) our organizational code of ethics (or conduct). Principle-guided-practices are built out of our value-embedded culture in our mission-controlled organization. That is the grand plan.

Chapter Seven, lastly, is about leadership and governance. If we don’t have good leadership and a solid approach to corporate governance, none of the preceding is going to happen. The blueprint will only be haphazardly followed: employees will become cynical, directors will be asleep on the job, and the company will flounder. So who is going to lead? Everyone has a leadership role to play in the company—but not the same one. How will effective ethical leadership take place? How will we measure our success—or lack of it? (partial answer: regular, no-holds-barred ethics and values assessments in employee performance reviews—and—employee assessments of company and management ethics).

At the end of each chapter are (1) a brief “Afterword” reflection on a topic related to the concerns of that chapter, (2) some questions for personal reflection or group discussion, (3) a couple suggested “exercises” to help you take the ideas of the chapter to the next level, and (4) a paragraph describing further resources (books, articles, web sites, etc.) for study of the topic of that chapter. With these addenda and the occasional footnotes, readers can take their study of organizational ethics several levels deeper (no excuses if that’s what you want and need). At the end of the book I have included three appendixes, including two “thought pieces” about (1) core values of healthy corporate cultures and (2) key principles guiding ethical leaders and organizational practices along with (3) some commentary on ethical problem cases described in Chapter Three.

I mentioned at the beginning of this preface that reading the Executive Summary paragraphs heading each chapter will be a quick way to get the basic message if speed is your priority right now. If you can beef up your diet just a tad, you can get the “reader’s digest” version by reading just the boxed statements that occur every page or two. Reading all the fine print of the audits and other examples takes some time but the payoff for including these items will come when you can get started inventing and implementing the ethics building project in your company.

Despite the presence of these detailed tools, and despite my professorial temptation (to which I have yielded many times in the past) to try to answer every possible objection, meander down every byway, and document every assertion—I have tried to resist, stay strong, and stay lean in this book. Most of my argument is common sense. Most of it is really just summarizing and applying to our workplace the best ideas and best practices of the past and the present.

Readers will note the frequent reference to Harris & Associates, a construction and project management firm based in Concord, California, and operating throughout the western United States. The ideas and strategies in It’s About Excellence have been put into practice at Harris in a truly exemplary way and they serve as a great illustration of how to make it all real. This book is not just about some vague theory. I am grateful to founder Carl Harris, current President Guy Erickson, and the entire Harris team for permission to share their example with a broader public.

My last name brands a lot of the tools in this book that I have designed over the years (interview and research questions, values and principles lists and questionnaires, audit and case analysis forms, etc.). It’s not my ego but my experience that made me do this. I am, of course, happy to share my stuff with a broader audience here. I would just ask that you properly credit the source both for the sake of justice and so that those who wish to make their way to this book will know where to go. Also, I am eager to hear your response to this book and its approach to ethics—and about your own innovations and applications. Please shoot me an e-mail and let me know.

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Book Endorsements & Praise

David Gill’s *It’s About Excellence* explains a tough topic in a very concise and even captivating manner. It doesn’t just “talk” about the topic, as so many books do, but actually provides great guidance on how to integrate ethics “into” business strategies. As an executive I was drawn in to key ethical decisions I’ve made for my business. *It’s About Excellence* is a perfect guide for any executive or entrepreneur planning their business and should be required reading for business school students.


Our company incorporated the ideas and concepts put forth in David Gill's *It's About Excellence* with resounding success as measured by the acceptance and enthusiasm of our employees. Now we have a moral and ethical guide for our company going forward that really describes our "heart and soul" to our employees and clients. It makes good business sense to me.

- Carl Harris, Chairman of the Board, Harris & Associates, Concord CA ([www.harris-assoc.com](http://www.harris-assoc.com))

Practical, comprehensive, and concise, David Gill’s *It’s About Excellence* is the perfect introduction to business ethics. CEOs looking to create ethical organizations should give copies to all their managers.

- James O'Toole, Professor, Marshall School of Business, USC, author *Leading Change: The Argument for Values-Based Leadership*, *The Executive’s Compass*, *Creating the Good Life*, and other books. ([www.jamesotoole.com](http://www.jamesotoole.com))

*It’s About Excellence* is thorough, compelling, and urgently needed to bring us back---and then keep us on the right track---to excellence in our business life.

- David M. Gilmour, Founder & President, Paradise Foods, Corte Madera CA ([www.foodsofparadise.com](http://www.foodsofparadise.com))

David Gill’s book title is right on target. *It’s About Excellence* is a fantastic, highly motivating book that every business owner, CEO and entrepreneur should read and implement. It is the first book I’ve seen that successfully shows how ethics, vision, and mission must be integrated from the start as key elements in building a company beyond average to excellent and exceptional.

- Rich Ferrari, Co-Founder and Managing Director, De Novo Ventures ([www.denovovc.com](http://www.denovovc.com))

What a treat to find an ethics text that is readable, practical, and still based on solid ethical theory! David Gill's book will be of value to anyone who has to run an organization, for profit or otherwise.

- Lisa Newton, Professor and Director, Program in Applied Ethics, Fairfield University (CT) ([www.fairfield.edu](http://www.fairfield.edu)); co-author of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Business Ethics and Society*; author of *Permission to Steal: Revealing the Roots of Corporate Scandal*, and many other works.

At a time when consumers, investors and employees are demanding transparency from the companies they purchase from, invest in, or work for, David Gill’s *Its About Excellence* is a timely and practical manifesto for not only doing well but doing the right thing. Anyone who invests time in recruiting talented people and developing high-performance organizations should also invest time with this book. A great resource for a management retreat.

- Doug Sterne, Senior Vice President, Clear Channel Radio

Business leaders need a new method, a new generation of tools and guidelines, to compete today both ethically and excellently. What ISO 9000, Malcolm Baldridge, and *In Search of Excellence* did for business quality twenty years ago, David Gill captures for today in *It’s About Excellence*.

- Peter Jackson, Founder, President & CEO, Intraware Inc. ([www.intraware.com](http://www.intraware.com))

It is rare that an academically distinguished ethicist can provide such an accessible, compelling and useful architecture for “ethically-healthy organizations.” Based upon his long-time engagement with the private and non-profit sectors, David Gill’s “blueprint” is a major contribution toward the construction of excellent and caring organizations.

*It’s About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations* © David W. Gill
David Gill has provided a compelling manifesto for a creative, proactive approach to ethics. Whether as an aid in making the case for ethics training, as a guide for designing and evaluating training proposals, or as the foundation for an integrated, systemic ethics program, *It’s About Excellence* is a rich and versatile manual, an essential resource.

-Maria I. Marques, Senior HR Analyst, Employee Development, East Bay Municipal Utility District (www.ebmud.com)

Successful businesses understand the fundamental and paramount importance of relationships with customers and employees. David Gill provides a useful blueprint for ethical stewardship of these essential relationships in any company. The key is a clear vision for the long term. In our post-Enron world, where greed and cutting corners are a daily reality on a global scale, this book sounds a much needed drum beat for what’s truly important.

-Clark Sept, Co-Founder/Principal, Business Place Strategies, Inc. (www.businessplacesstrategies.com)

David Gill’s *It’s About Excellence* poses probing questions every manager should seriously contemplate. His mission-control “blueprint” is a powerful synopsis of how to improve the ethical health of organizations---with a set of tools for aligning corporate cultures with ethical decisions and behavior.


For any business student or working professional, *It’s About Excellence* is a must-read book. Drawing on more than three decades of ethics teaching and practice, David Gill explains in detail the theory of ethics as well as how to apply it in the workplace, with several practical questionnaires, diagnostic tests, and matrixes to put into your ethics toolbox.

-Kendall Mau, International microfinance consultant & banker (www.microfinancetravels.typepad.com)

*It’s About Excellence* is a densely packed, realistic, flexible, and proactive guide for developing ethical leadership and businesses. Owners of the very smallest businesses---not just big corporations---can mine a wealth of practical information to help them become and remain excellent in this challenging business climate. As the sole proprietor of a small bookstore for over thirty years, I highly recommend David Gill’s book for other “Main Street” businesses.

-Carol Spencer, Proprietor, Russian Hill Bookstore, San Francisco, CA

David Gill’s *It’s About Excellence* is a well written, theoretically rich, insightful and practical book. The concepts and tools contained within its pages can assist business leaders in the critical tasks of developing healthy organizational cultures and restoring overall trust in business. The book is a wonderful resource for students and practicing managers alike.

-Kenman Wong, Professor of Business Ethics, Seattle Pacific University (www.spu.edu); co-author, Beyond Integrity: A Judeo-Christian Approach to Business Ethics

*It’s About Excellence* is a must-read for any company leader who wants to establish a culture of ethics and excellence---and it is an excellent tool and guide for on-going training in any company that already has such a culture. Absolutely enjoyable reading! —Guy Erickson, President, Harris & Associates, Concord CA (www.harris-assoc.com)

*It’s About Excellence* demonstrates convincingly that ethics is hardwired into the fabric of successful organizations. Much more than regulatory compliance, sound ethics is fleshed-out-excellence manifested in daily work life---from CEO to mid-level manager to entry-level staff. Anyone seeking to build sustained organizational excellence should keep this resource close at hand.

*It’s About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations*  © David W. Gill
David Gill provides a compelling and insightful manifesto linking ethics to healthy, excellent organizations. He doesn’t just preach at us about what to do but also provides why and how to implement an ethics program—a program that weaves throughout an organization and guides people to achieve more than what they may have thought possible, in ways consistent with innate desires for fairness. *It’s About Excellence* helps us see the power of authenticity and integrity.

- Randall L. Englund, Englund Project Management Consultancy; author, *Creating an Environment for Successful Projects* (www.englundpmc.com)

David Gill powerfully shows why good ethics is in the best interests of business and masterfully brings together ethical theory and practical application tools for business leaders and managers, HR and training directors, compliance and ethics officers, and MBA students. *It’s About Excellence* gets to the heart of the matter for anyone from a budding entrepreneur to a seasoned business leader. More than theory, more than bright ideas, this book provides a working roadmap to a sound ethics that is woven into the very fabric of an organization.

- Trish Fisher, Assoc. Chair, School for Professional Studies Business Program, Vanguard University (www.vanguard.edu); former Marketing Manager, Procter & Gamble

*It’s About Excellence* is a fascinating read. Starting with the basics for ethics "neophytes," David Gill builds a sound framework for analyzing the issues managers face, from crisis management to longer term strategy and planning. Discussions of mission/vision, culture, practices, and leadership have been augmented with real-world cases, pragmatic guidelines, and checklists; this is a workbook which executives can immediately apply to their own situations.

- Juan P. Montermoso, President, Montermoso Associates (www.montermoso.com)

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