



Three Inconvenient Truths About Corruption

Having honest, adult conversations about corruption requires accepting that none of us is ethically pure.

These days, I sometimes begin my classes on corruption with an unusual admission. I announce to my students – who may be judges, police officers, military investigators, bureaucrats or any other variety of public official – that corruption is not a problem removed from me. I am corrupted too.

This is only partly a gesture of humility. It is also my attempt to initiate a dialogue on business ethics that is honest, for a change. The common thing to do when the subject of ethics comes up is to grandstand and make sweeping moral declarations, as though combating corruption were simply a matter of finding the “bad” people in an organisation, agency, justice system, etc.

But corruption has always existed and goes on everywhere. It is indeed very likely that it will always exist. Why not also in myself? Of course, I can avoid thinking about it. Even more convenient, I can choose or invent a definition of corruption that does not include my actions. In doing so, however, I am indulging a self-protective fantasy in which corruption has lost some of its most valuable meaning.

Most of us are very uncomfortable when confronted with the truth of our unethical behaviours. Since we tend to think in exclusive categories, we fear being bad because we think it implies we are not good.

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However, the truth is that ethics is a grey zone. Each one of us is both good and bad. We are not saints.

In my experience, the more I know the extent to which I am corrupted, the better I am at navigating the grey zone of my own ethics. Finding moral orientation in the grey zone sometimes entails resisting my own imperfections and striving for something higher. At other times, it is a matter of accepting some of my own “badness” so that I can keep my attention focused on the real world, on things as they actually are.

It can be difficult to determine what to resist and what to accept. Here are three ideas that I have found useful in my moral and ethical decision making.

A zero-tolerance stance towards corruption is neither necessarily honest nor desirable

When I invite business executives and civil servants to consider “accepting” their own corruption, it is not an invitation to moral nihilism. Instead, it is a reminder that none of us is perfect. We all have flaws and blind spots that we must be willing to face head-on if we are to learn and improve. If we adopt an unrealistic standard for ourselves (and others), we will be incapable of choosing our moral battles wisely.

For my part, I am trying to embrace the fact that, as a Western male individual, my thinking is biased by an education, a culture, social norms and habits that constitute my identity. This has both good and bad ramifications. Teaching all over the world, I have come to realise that some of my attitudes could be perceived as discriminatory, even racist sometimes.

When a student points out some hidden negative bias in my teaching, I strive to show interest and curiosity. Then I can learn, instead of pushing away any information that contradicts the temptation towards self-conferred sainthood.

So overall, I have very good reasons to have some tolerance about my ethical vulnerabilities. As I am intolerant of the aspects of myself that I really want to fight, I can be tolerant of the aspects that I accept as part of my fallible humanity. I can bring those aspects to a clearer and more peaceful conscience.

Abandon the business case in order to re-invent it

Being clear-headed and emotionally mature – i.e. adult – about corruption means confronting the tensions that can arise between moral and profit-making imperatives or, if you like, between business value and stakeholder value. These are both moving targets, and it is a rare moment indeed when the two are aligned such that they can be pierced with a single arrow.

Yet executives persist in the belief that they can popularise anti-corruption by stressing the “business case” for doing the right thing.

I believe that an insistence on the business case contains fatal contradictions. The search for profits – i.e. the core cause of corruption – cannot also be the core of anti-corruption. Treating anti-corruption like a strategy that must yield financial returns is like treating a disease with its very cause. It almost ensures that we will miss the most meaningful opportunities for positive change. Yet this is the situation we face today, in which anti-corruption itself risks becoming corrupted. If, however, we submit our way of thinking to principled self-scrutiny, positive change can be the catalyst for improving all stakeholder relationships and, ultimately, achieving sustainable and meaningful business success.

As corruption begins with temptation, it is important to promote anti-corruption for moral reasons, not just self-serving ones. It is only to the devil that ethics can be sold.

In my own teaching, I have had to abandon the business case. I needed to be prepared to teach outside my students’ comfort zone instead of always telling them what they preferred to hear.

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With time and hard work, I built sustained and profitable client relationships. Still, I continue to navigate the grey zone between my intellectual honesty and my own success. It is only because I am not confined to the business case that I can incrementally invent mine.

Altruism is not always ethically superior

Ethics and altruism are often wrongly conflated. Especially when it comes to corruption, doing what is best for others does not equate to acting ethically. In my experience, it seems that my students are spending a great deal of their time and effort pursuing goals – or working around constraints – other than their own. In many cases, their unethical behaviour serves the interests of their company. It may also stem from deference to authority, blinding them to the risks they personally incur by disregarding ethics. Hence, paradoxically, a deeper anchoring in their own self-interest could indeed promote more ethical behaviour.

Embrace paradoxes, not platitudes

Paradoxes can be unpopular in the boardroom. Nonetheless, they are essential because we do not live in a black and white world. Rather, we are complex beings navigating an even more complex world. An ethics suitable for such a world will be more tolerant of paradoxes than of the platitudes that too often dominate discussions about corruption in the corridors of power.

To be sure, complexity and contradictions are difficult to embrace and require a new way of thinking. But accepting them allows us to navigate the ethical grey zone in a way that avoids categorical judgments while acknowledging that some behaviours are more ethical than others.

It also clears the ground for more adult conversations about ethics and especially about corruption. These conversations are urgently needed today, as anti-corruption is at risk of itself becoming corrupted – converted to a moralistic mask designed to prevent us from looking unpleasant realities in the face.

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