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# Businesses' Best Policy Honesty

**F**REE enterprise is based upon the concept of doing business honestly. When confidence does not exist in a transaction, the law of the jungle may prevail as buyer and seller try to protect their respective interests however they may.

The moral decay that has impaired other aspects of our lives is causing serious and costly deterioration of business attitudes. The trend is still downward.

When news about alleged kickbacks, bribes and other misuse of state funds was being reported, one businessman admitted privately that he had gone along, because if he had not done so his firm would have received little or no business from the state. "And after all, what's a little corruption among friends?" he jokingly asked while telling about it.

The answer is obvious. Corruption is corruption, whether it is among friends, strangers or enemies. And corruption contaminates everybody it touches, including innocent people.

Business firms prided themselves on honesty and public confidence in the past, but few mention the subject now. There may be a reason why hardly anybody displays the motto, "Honesty is the best policy." It might be hard to do business with that reminder on the wall.

The Associated Press recently quoted a national figure as saying that we should shed the "false innocence" that is prevalent in America, calling it a "self-deceiving illusion that we are a moral, good people." In the same story, a theologian was cited as saying that "American democracy is built upon the premise that human beings are too corrupt to trust."

Superficial observations might lead to such conclusions, but they are wrong. Millions of people have higher ideals, more faith in our future, and greater integrity than those opinions.

But there is no getting around the lawyer who tries to squeeze his client through an illegal loophole, the employee who can't tell his money and the firm's money apart, and the individual who cheats on his golf score or his income tax returns.

The excuse is frequently offered that "everybody is doing it!" The sad fact is that many of those smart enough to get away with sizable amounts of money or property dishonestly have enough business acumen to satisfy their greed honestly.

Unless a Wisconsin newspaper wins its appeal from an NLRB ruling, honesty may become a negotiable matter in union contracts. The federal official held that "freebies,"

junkets and gifts are part of a Newspaper Guild reporter's working conditions and that the publisher can't rule them out by posting a code of ethics, even if the gifts might influence reporters' coverage of stories.

Other businesses and government are bothered by the same sort of problem. The Federal Energy Administration last summer posted a ban on employees accepting free food or drinks from companies under the agency's jurisdiction or contracting with it.

Honesty still is the best policy, even though it might not be as widely regarded as a cornerstone of success as it used to be.