

The claim that ethics is not based solely on absolutes has some truth to it. However, to argue that all ethics is relative contradicts everyday experience. For example, the view that because a person or society believes something to be right makes it right is problematic when examined. Many societies believed in and practiced slavery; however, in contemporary individuals' experiences, slavery is morally wrong. When individuals and firms do business in societies that promote slavery, does that mean that the individuals and firms also must condone and practice slavery? The simple logic of relativism, which is discussed in Chapter 3, gets complicated when seen in daily experience. The question that can be asked regarding this myth is, "Relative to whom or what? And why?" The logic of this ethic, which answers that question with "Relative to me, myself, and my interests" as a maxim, does not promote community. Also, if ethical relativism were carried to its logical extreme, no one could disagree with anyone about moral issues because each person's values would be true for him or her. Ultimately, this logic would state that no right or wrong exists apart from an individual's or society's principles. How could interactions be completed if ethical relativism was carried to its limit? Moreover, the U.S. government, in its vigorous pursuit of Microsoft, certainly has not practiced a relativist style of ethics.

#### **Myth 4: Good Business Means Good Ethics**

The reasoning here<sup>30</sup> is that executives and firms that maintain a good corporate image, practice fair and equitable dealings with customers and employees, and earn profits by legitimate, legal means are de facto ethical. Such firms, therefore, would not have to be concerned explicitly with ethics in the workplace. Just do a hard, fair day's work, and that has its own moral goodness and rewards.

The faulty reasoning underlying this logic is that ethics does not always provide solutions to technical business problems. Moreover, as Buchholz<sup>31</sup> argued, no correlation exists between "goodness" and material success.

It also argues that "excellent" companies and corporate cultures have created concern for people in the workplace that exceeds the profit motive. In these cases, excellence seems to be related more to customer service, to maintenance of meaningful public and employee relationships, and to corporate integrity than to profit motive.<sup>32</sup>

The point is that ethics is not something added to business operations; it is necessary to managing successfully. A more accurate, logical statement from business experience would suggest that "good ethics means good business." This is more in line with observations from successful companies that are ethical first and also profitable.

Finally, "What happens, then, if what should be ethically done is not the best thing for business? What happens when good ethics is not good business?"

The ethical thing to do may not always be in the best interests of the firm. We should promote business ethics, not because good ethics is good business, but because we are morally required to adopt the moral point of view in all our dealings with other people—and business is no exception. In business, as in all other human endeavors, we must be prepared to pay the costs of ethical behavior. The costs may sometimes seem high, but that is the risk we take in valuing and preserving our integrity.<sup>33</sup>