

# Defense of a much-maligned but excellent man of business

Every Christmas season, we are treated to multiple opportunities to witness the deliberate slander of one of the world's most famous businessmen—Ebenezer Scrooge. With each showing of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," poor Mr. Scrooge must endure this onslaught alone and without the benefit of counsel. As a consequence of this one-sided negative attack, we all join in condemning Scrooge and rejoice in his ultimate transformation without giving due consideration to his laudable qualities.

In the interest of justice and fair play, and in keeping with the Christmas spirit, I offer this defense of Mr. Scrooge and explore the question of whether such an "excellent man of business" is an "ethical" man of business.

Let's begin by reviewing the case against Scrooge. It is alleged that he should be looked upon with scorn because:

- He is the "hand at the grindstone" sort that is working all the time.

- He barely heats his office in the winter and has a dark and gloomy house because "darkness is cheap."

- He refuses to give to charity.

- He supports public funding of prisons and union workhouses that are places so wretched that many "would rather die" than go there.

- He is tight-fisted with his money and pays low wages to his clerk and only grudgingly agrees to allow him paid leave for Christmas day.

In response to these allegations, I stipulate that Mr. Scrooge is a miserable, unhappy, unpleasant person. But, far from evidencing unethical business practices,



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when looked upon in their most favorable light, these alleged "crimes" strongly support Scrooge's cause. Let's review together a more fair-minded recitation of the facts in the order presented above.

- He is industrious, conscientious and hardworking. He shoulders more than his share of the load and even works holidays when other less conscientious workers take time off.

- He exemplifies good environmental stewardship by minimizing waste, conserving natural resources and having a small carbon footprint. Future generations and the natural environment will profit from his sacrifice.

- He conscientiously exercises a low-risk, conservative fiscal policy that will serve his business well when economic downturns demand sufficient cash reserves to survive. Unlike others, you won't see Ebenezer asking hardworking tax payers for a bailout as a consequence of poor fiscal management and high-risk business practices.

- He is a law-abiding taxpayer who does not seek to shirk his civic duty by moving his operations offshore or exploiting loopholes in the tax code.

- He diligently satisfies his obligation to his employee by paying him a steady market

wage, on time, and even provides for paid vacation (albeit once a year) even though the law does not require him to do so.

Taking these attributes into account, Ebenezer appears to be saintly by comparison to the scoundrels in our modern business world who engage in self dealing, lie to shareholders, avoid paying their fair share of taxes, loot pension funds, rape the environment, cheat, steal or otherwise defraud customers and business owners.

Mr. Dickens leads us to believe that Mr. Scrooge's transformation, in response to unrelenting harassment by well-meaning spirits, will be better for all concerned. But he never really tells us the rest of the story. We never find out what Ebenezer's newfound generosity does to his business over the long term.

What if Mr. Scrooge's new, more socially conscious business model leads to bankruptcy and ruin for him, his investors, customers and employees? Would that be a more or less ethical business model than the one he and his former partner Marley successfully followed for many years?

The answer to this question has very real implications for every business professional. It illustrates the reason why being an ethical business professional is never as simple as just being a nice person in a Christmas fable. Instead, being an ethical business professional demands that we strike principled balances between powerful opposing forces.

Working very hard may be good for the bottom line but wreak havoc on your health and your personal life. Being a good steward of the natural environment is essential for future generations but is often costly

and difficult in a competitive global marketplace, where there is an uneven playing field as a consequence of varying national environmental regulations. Being generous to charities may be laudable, but if mismanaged might result in a lessened return for investors. Paying taxes is a civic duty, but it is also your duty to pay only your fair share in accordance with a byzantine tax code. Providing generous benefits to employees is good for them and their families, but, if overdone, potentially weakens firm competitiveness and economic viability.

Seeking the right balance between such competing interests is always hard because there is rarely one right way to do it. The best we can do, as business professionals, is to conscientiously use the fundamental principles of honesty, fairness, compassion, respect and responsibility to guide us along the way.

I grant you that, prior to encountering his ghostly apparitions, Scrooge was not striking an optimal balance for himself, his employees or his business. But, the next time you sit down to watch "A Christmas Carol" or pick up the Dickens classic from the bookshelf, perhaps you'll look more kindly upon brother Scrooge and contemplate how well you are striking the balance at your firm.

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