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## **Why Google Was Smart To Drop Its “Don’t Be Evil” Motto**

Simply asking companies to avoid unethical behavior sets the bar too low, all but ensuring they’ll fail.



[PHOTO: PIER MARCO TACCA/GETTY IMAGES]

**BY DAVID MAYER**

These were a few of the headlines in the news last week about accusations of unethical labor practices at Nestlé: [“There Are Renewed Calls to Boycott Nestlé as the Company’s Slave Labor Is Again in the Spotlight”](#); [“Nestlé Admits Slavery in Thailand While Fighting Child Labor Lawsuit in Ivory Coast”](#); [“Nestlé’s Self-Policing Policy Against Slave Labor Smells Like a PR Campaign.”](#) More than just appalling consumers, these reports have a

downside that runs deeper than companies like Nestlé: They lower the bar for what we expect from businesses.

And that's a shame, partly because the bar is so low already: Many of us merely ask companies *not* to be unethical, and seldom expect them to actually be *good*. When [forming its parent company Alphabet](#) last year, Google [dropped its old motto](#), "Don't be evil," and exchanged it with, "Do the right thing."

It's subtle shifts like that one that can make a huge difference. Here's why.

### THE TROUBLE WITH "DON'T BE BAD"

U.S. presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders has [recently claimed](#) that the basic business model of Wall Street banks is fraud. The point of that remark, it seems, is to call for an end to unethical practices that put ordinary consumers' and taxpayers' financial health at risk. That notion leaves little room for hope that the major banks could actually do something positive.

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If someone described you as "not unethical" or "not fraudulent," how would you feel? That's tepid praise at best and a backhanded compliment at worst. Looking back on your deathbed to decide, "Well, at least I didn't harm anyone," would you consider that a good life?

Psychologists call the focus on avoiding bad behavior "[proscription](#)," or prohibition. Take the Ten Commandments: Eight of them are about *not* doing bad things (thou shall not murder, steal, covet, etc.). This makes sense as a basis for a moral system in society, because we need people to *not* commit acts that harm others.

A few millennia later, we now have the research to confirm that "[bad is stronger than good](#)" when it comes to producing certain behavioral outcomes. Indeed, social psychologist [Roy Baumeister](#) convincingly argues there's an evolutionary reason to focus more on getting people to avoid bad things than to do good things; among other reasons, humans are hardwired to consider potential threats that could harm us. Bob Sutton, author of fantastic and influential books like [Good Boss, Bad Boss](#) and [The No Asshole Rule](#), draws on Baumeister's work to highlight why it's so critical to [stamp out poorly behaving leaders](#) (and employees) in organizations.

And while that point is well taken, it has its risks—namely perpetuating the idea that simply avoiding bad behavior is enough to qualify a company for being ethical.

## HOW GOODNESS INSPIRES GOODNESS

It's clearly important for people in organizations to avoid unethical conduct because of the negative consequences that behavior can have for those within and without the companies. But when I ask employees and executives alike if they're inspired by leaders who do not lie, steal, or cheat, the answer is generally no: That's the bare minimum of what's expected, but is rarely enough to inspire others to positive action.

What *is* required are “prescriptions,” the things you *should* do but would likely not be censured for *not* doing: Donating money, volunteering time, or being friendly and inclusive. The philosopher Immanuel Kant [referred to these](#) as “imperfect duties,” because although they're desirable actions, they aren't necessarily required of us all the time. But for leaders, it's important to go above and beyond; imperfect duties are part of the job description.

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Compelling [research by David Jones](#) and his colleagues finds that job applicants would prefer to work for companies that show real social responsibility—those that improve their communities, the environment, and the world. Employees are most likely to be galvanized by leaders who are actively perceived to be fair, virtuous, and self-sacrificing. Separate research by [Ethical Systems founder Jonathan Haidt](#) demonstrates that such leaders influence employees to feel a sense of “elevation”—a positive emotion that lifts us up as a result of moral excellence. This elevated emotional state can inspire employees toward behaviors that aren't required of them but that greatly [improve organizational functioning](#).

Job applicants, employees, and customers all want organizations to not be bad, but they're only inspired by those that do good. That's why we feel excited to learn of [companies that offer exceptional perks and benefits](#), like Netflix's one paid year of parental leave, or Salesforce employees' six days of paid volunteer time. Those policies go beyond the status quo of “do no harm” by trying to do good for other people.

While we aren't lacking for businesses caught in reprehensible behavior, there's reason for optimism. Some companies are going beyond proscriptions and embracing positive prescriptions as well. Not only after adopting, "Do the right thing," Alphabet recently [surpassed Apple](#) as the world's most valuable company, with a market cap of over \$547 billion. And now that the Internet and social media make corporate scandals harder than ever to hide—and real social responsibility easier than ever to see and applaud—we may soon start seeing more of "the right things" actually getting done.

Google's shift in wording was subtle but profound in its focus, by moving from bad behavior to good. More companies should move in that direction—it is, after all, the right thing to do.

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