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Ethics Means Doing the Right Thing

This month's article was inspired by an article recently published in 2004 by Mary Pieschek for TAXPRO, a professional journal written for people who prepare income taxes.

Ms. Pieschek has prestigious credentials—having taught ethics at the University level, and has conducted seminars in Eastern Europe and Latin America on behalf of the U.S. Government. She also serves on the Wisconsin Supreme Court's Ethics Committee.

OK, so she's a noted authority on ethics. But aren't all of us experts? Don't we all live our lives according to some sort of ethical precepts and practices? And don't we in Small Business operate according to some internal moral code, and possibly a formally established Code of Ethics?

So let's talk about our business ethics here in York County.

I think ethics is easy to define—it's simply doing the right thing. Defining is "The Right Thing" is the tricky part.

How do we learn to do the Right Thing? Learning starts at home, of course, and is continued in school, reinforced in religious study and practice, and in business, possibly adherence to a published Code of Ethics.

So what is The Right Thing? Pieschek says it's easy: It's only 2 things:

- Respect for other people.
- Telling the Truth.

So what about white lies? We've all done it—we've shaded the truth, because we don't want to hurt someone. Does a white lie make us unethical?

I have trouble with this one, and I'll bet that you Probably we should be glad that we have trouble defining ethical behavior. The person who always thinks their way is right is probably the one in

in trouble!

Back to this truth-telling thing. Failing to tell the truth breaks down into One of categories:

- Someone didn't tell it'
- Someone didn't tell all of it;
- Someone didn't tell it in time;
- Someone didn't tell the right person.

For most of us, for most of the time, that first one isn't a problem. That's just a pure lie, and most of us have learned one way or another not to do it.

The last one—not telling the right person—is a real problem in most lives. It's also called gossip. Stated differently, it's telling the wrong person instead of the right person.

For years I was a Lay Leader in our church at a particularly difficult time in the life of this Church, and I saw a lot of this. I'm not proud to say that sometimes I was the guilty party.

It's just not ethical to talk about someone behind their back. That is triangulating, and it carries a double penalty—not only have you failed to address the real issue that you have with the one person that is part of the problem, you have brought a third person into the triangle.

Right now, I'm involved in my annual time of testing, also known as Tax Season.

Almost all taxpayers are honest, and very much want to do the right thing. And yet when they think their taxes are "too high", they will present some dubious deductions without documentation and which I doubt would withstand IRS audit.

These are not gross violations. I'll tell you about gross violations. I saw a return this year where a self-employed office worker with no employees claimed a \$64,000 uniform deduction! I'd hate to defend that one!

But I know I will be asked to at least shade the truth on behalf of decent people, and it's hard to resist cutting an occasional corner here and there.

This year IRS has raised the stakes if a tax preparer takes a



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position on behalf of a client that the preparer knows or should know will not be upheld. The Preparer has a better chance of getting penalties as well as being named to the IRS Naughty List if s/he doesn't tell the truth.

I imagine that all of us have the same temptation in both our personal and our business lives.

Without consciously realizing it, over the years I have developed 2 principles that I hope help guide me through the thicket:

- Continue to question your actions
- Worry about the Slippery Slope

So, in the final analysis, what is ethics?

- Respect for other people.
- Telling the truth.

Is not telling the truth a disrespectful act? Aren't we really saying, "You can't handle the truth!"

And isn't telling the truth the highest form of respect?