

## Choosing Good Over Smart

Duke University, one of the top Ivy League colleges in the USA., suspended 34 of its final business school students for allegedly cheating on an open-book, take-home final examination in one of the core classes. A number of students had copied the results to the questions, leading to similarity of answers. A university investigation followed, leading to suspensions of these students. A study issued by Rutgers University in September 2006 suggests that 56 percent of the graduate business school students admitted to cheating in the examination in past academic year compared to 47% students of non-business courses.

More than a decade ago, the protagonists of the cartoon strip, Calvin & Hobbes created by Bill Watterson, from where I draw much of my limited wisdom, dealt with the classical dilemma of choosing between good and smart in their own unique way. Hobbes asks the question whether it is better to do the right thing and fail or better to do the smart thing and succeed? Calvin summarises by saying that undeserved success does not give any satisfaction, neither does well deserved failure. He adds, the real world values success and not principles – then reasons, that is why the world is in such a mess.

Most of the advanced countries rely on a 'code of honour' to reinforce ideas like ethics and honesty. In India however, we have legislated laws like the Copying Act, which includes imprisonment to prevent students from cheating in a board or other examinations. India is also one of the very few countries where school leaving examinations are held under police supervision! A sad reflection on the pandemic state of ethics and values at the levels of our school and college education system.

Why do students, whether in business colleges or in schools cheat?

Maybe because society has deeply ingrained in young minds the linear relationship between good grades, better interviews, coveted jobs and upward mobility. At every level, this equation gets reinforced and employers feed the frenzy to get the 'best'

students, i.e., students with the best grades to work for them and enhance the corporate sheen. It is a moot point whether these young recruits to corporate life can erase the playing styles of the system they have been exposed to all their young lives and suddenly embrace the ethereal concepts of ethics, principles and values.

The pressure to meet expectations of the investors, targets, cash flows, one's own goals and aspirations paves way rather quickly to jump ethical and moral boundaries and resort to half truths and blatant lies. The overwhelming desire to manage the system, fix the earnings graph or play the mood swings of the Dalal Street gets embedded in the culture and in its extreme manifestation – Enron like scandals happen. The downward spiral continues and it is very hard to reverse deeply entrenched habits. The good news is that most people still play by the rules and there lies the hope of millions.

The choice between the good and smart is not always easy. The smart is always seductive and alluring, but unless we respect and take pride in how we have reached our goal, the good will never prevail.

Going back to Calvin and Hobbes, Calvin claimed a moral victory by acknowledging the issue and turning in a blank paper on an ethics test. The debate continues till date and the stakes keep getting higher.

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