Chapter 13
"Don't Be Evil" and Beyond for High Tech Organizations:
Ethical Statements and Mottos (and Responsibility)

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ABSTRACT

Societal pressures on high tech organizations to define and disseminate their ethical stances are increasing as the influences of the technologies involved expand. Many Internet-based businesses have emerged in the past decades; growing numbers of them have developed some kind of moral declaration in the form of mottos or ethical statements. For example, the corporate motto "don't be evil" (often linked with Google/Alphabet) has generated considerable controversy about social and cultural impacts of search engines. After addressing the origins of these mottos and statements, this chapter projects the future of such ethical manifestations in the context of critically-important privacy, security, and economic concerns. The chapter analyzes potential influences of the ethical expressions on corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The chapter analyzes issues of whether "large-grained" corporate mottos can indeed serve to supply social and ethical guidance for organizations as opposed to more complex, detailed codes of ethics or comparable attempts at moral clarification.

INTRODUCTION

Evil is whatever Sergey [Brin] says is evil. - Eric Schmidt, former Executive Chairman of Google, as quoted in Vise and Malseed (2005)

How do organizations make sense of the panoply of ethical issues they face, especially in rapidly-changing technological and social environments? Challenges are expanding for high tech research and development organizations as their technologies grow in societal impact (Broeders & Taylor, 2017), from considering the problems of young people confronting cyberbullies (Oravec, 2012) to the use of social media

by terrorist organizations (Callahan, 2017; Tsesis, 2017). Some organizations develop and disseminate detailed ethical codes (Lere & Gaumnitz, 2007), others develop mottos or statements that encapsulate their positions and possibly focus the attentions of their stakeholders on critical matters (Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Martin, 2012). Internet-based organizations often have only a short timeframe for establishing reputations and setting ethical tones (since technologies shift quickly in prominence, along with corporate identities), and clues to their corporate culture can be vital to observers and stakeholders. This chapter deals with these issues through exploring the origins and societal influences of Google's "don't be evil" ethical motto and related corporate ethical statements and initiatives; in the past decade it expands these insights to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts of other Internet-based organizations. What role could the notion of "evil" (associated with powerful and evocative theological and spiritual values) play in considering the actions of an Internet company? Why did "don't be evil" as a motto have such a powerful and lasting influence on the ethical cultures of Internet business, reaching well beyond Google itself and into other information technology companies? An assortment of ethical dimensions has been debated in the light of the "don't be evil" motto, including the fairness and legitimacy of various information-related practices (Hoofnagle, 2009).

Analyses of how corporate mottos and related statements are utilized in the social construction of organizational activity can be useful for researchers, public policy analysts, and investors who wish to understand an organization's ethical perspectives and approaches. Answers to these questions may also be of assistance to organizations that are endeavoring to craft their own ethical expressions and communications as well as participate more fully in CSR efforts. Besio and Pronzini (2014) write that "morality becomes available to organizations as a medium that can be re-specified according to their internal dynamics" (p. 287), using such modalities as ethical codes, statements, and mottos in these efforts. From a critical perspective, the development of such ethical expressions is apparently unsettling to some organizational participants; for example, ethical codes and other detailed statements can be used as "instruments to further domination" rather than as means for enlightening and informing participants (Helin & Sandström, 2010; Helin, Jensen, Sandström, & Clegg, 2011). Winkler (2011) discusses how some ethical codes place employees in subordinate positions as "passive receivers of rules and regulations" who have "a need to be monitored and controlled by the higher levels of the corporate hierarchy" (p. 653), which runs counter to the expressed perspective of some Internet-based organizations. The process of code development should include individuals such as designers and engineers who may have special insight into how technologies may evolve (van Wynsberghe & Robbins, 2014). Ethical code development often provides a platform for the delineation of organizational perspectives and policies on critically-important matters, and their dissemination and discussion can produce otherwise-shielded insights about organizational conditions (Lere & Gaumnitz, 2007). In contrast, mottos are "larger grained" and often convey sweeping ideals rather than specific guidance (Martin, 2012).

ROOTS OF GOOGLE'S "DON'T BE EVIL" MOTTO

Google (a part of Alphabet Corporation) is a US entity that was incorporated on September 4, 1998 as a privately held company operating in a Menlo Park, California garage; Google's initial public offering (IPO) was on August 19, 2004, at least three years after the motto was coined and adopted. Google's impact as an organization has been considerable: for example, the word "googling" has become a commonly-used term that was entered into the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2006 (Auletta, 2009). Using the search

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