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## Developing an Understanding of Positive and Negative Organizational Ethics by Watching Scenes from the Greatest Hollywood Business Movies

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## Teaching/Pedagogy

### *Developing an Understanding of Positive and Negative Organizational Ethics by Watching Scenes from the Greatest Hollywood Business Movies\**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

It is proposed to use scenes from Hollywood's greatest movies about business for the purpose of developing an understanding of positive and negative organizational ethics. Five lists of "greatest business movies" are enumerated, and the overlapping movies are specified in the final list. An evaluation form is developed, and the movies are singled out for their ethical dilemmas and resolutions. The conclusion notes that studying carefully selected positive and negative role models as depicted by Hollywood films can create an improved organizational climate for all.

**KEY WORDS** Films; Role Models; Organizational Ethics

There are many ways to study the ethical implications of human behavior in organizations. Surveys, structured observations, data analyses, and even ethnographic interactions have all been used to greater or lesser effect (Crane 1999; Mintzberg 1989). In fact, Crane asserts that there is a "paucity of cultural or experiential perspectives on corporate morality" (p. 245) and cites Brigley's findings from his study "Business Ethics Research: A Cultural Perspective" (1995). More often than not, it seems that the message is lost in the methodology, and certainly, the ethical implications are obfuscated by the results.

Enter the Hollywood blockbuster. Film study provides a perspective that is often unmatched by other methods for its experiential approach (Corrigan 2010). For most students today, media in the form of YouTube videos and Hollywood movies provide a vehicle for articulating ideas about organizational behavior and decision making that can also be couched in the form of a case study for resolving various ethical dilemmas. Admittedly, sometimes these resolutions are somewhat contrived, but when carefully

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selected, they can be thought-provoking and meaningful. Why not use this media vehicle as a means for developing an understanding of positive and negative organizational ethics? This paper provides a framework for doing just that. Further, unlike other articles about using Hollywood movies to teach concepts of management (Bumpus 2005; Macy and Terry 2008), this one specifies the appropriate scene and links it to the relevant ethical concept.

### **Methodology**

A survey was conducted of the “greatest business movies of all time” through multiple Internet searches. The survey utilized Google’s search engine. In short, if Google.com identified a workable list of “greatest business movies of all time,” that list was included. That survey yielded lists from 5 sources as shown in Table 1.

Just as with many other studies based on Internet searches, it is apparent that the methodology utilized by the list makers leaves much to be desired. Specifically, only Forbes.com (Ackman 2001) outlined a meaningful methodology specifying how the list was constructed. Apparently, all of the other lists were based on the whim of one or more editors or, in the case of msnbc.com, were constructed based on the choices of the film critic John Hartl. With all due respect to Mr. Hartl, his opinions are valued by some but why should most rely on a methodology of one? Also, what relevance will the 2012 State University undergraduate attach to such older and perhaps dated films as *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Solid Gold Cadillac* (1956), or *Desk Set* (1957)? In short, too many of Mr. Hartl’s top five picks (with the one exception of *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946)) were not endorsed by others. The Forbes.com Web site, in contrast, clearly discloses that its selections were picked by a “panel of mavens” (Forbes.com, 2011). Members of the panel were chosen on the basis of their expertise in the film industry. The panel included professors of cinematography, film project directors, Hollywood agents, and film critics. The panel consisted of:

Judith Crist, film critic and journalism professor, Columbia University  
Matthew Gross, president of production, Kopelson Entertainment  
Lawrence Inglee, vice president, the Mark Gordon Co.  
Patricia Hanson, executive editor and project director, American Film Institute  
Rick Jewell, film professor, University of Southern California  
Peter Kafka, staff writer, *Forbes*  
Michael Lewis, author  
Hunt Lowry, president and CEO, Gaylord Films  
Jack Mathews, film critic, *New York Daily News*  
Chad Oman, president of production, Jerry Bruckheimer Films  
Bob Osher, co-president of production, Miramax Films  
Chris Petriken, agent, William Morris Agency  
Jerry I. Porras, professor, Stanford Graduate School of Business  
Tim Sarnoff, president, Sony Pictures Imageworks  
Robert Sklar, film professor, New York University  
Richard Walter, film professor, University of California Los Angeles

**Table 1. The Greatest Business Movies**

#	Ask Men	MSNBC.com	Forbes.com	YoungMoney.com	Business Pundit.com
1	<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)	<i>The Magnificent Ambersons</i> (1942)	<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)	<i>Working Girl</i> (1987)	<i>The Corporation</i> (2003)
2	<i>Wall Street</i> (1987)	<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> (1946)	<i>The Godfather II</i> (1974)	<i>Office Space</i> (1999)	<i>All About Eve</i> (1950)
3	<i>Trading Places</i> (1983)	<i>The Solid Gold Cadillac</i> (1956)	<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> (1946)	<i>Wall Street</i> (1987)	<i>Godfather II</i> (1974)
4	<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i> (1992)	<i>Desk Set</i> (1957)	<i>The Godfather I</i> (1972)	<i>Startup.com</i> (2001)	<i>Salesman</i> (1968)
5	<i>Jerry Maguire</i> (1996)	<i>The Apartment</i> (1960)	<i>Network</i> (1976)	<i>The Pursuit of Happyness</i> (2006)	<i>Modern Times</i> (1936)
6	<i>Barbarians at the Gate</i> (1993)	<i>How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying</i> (1967)	<i>Insider</i> (1999)	<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i> (1992)	<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> (1946)
7	<i>Goodfellas</i> (1990)	<i>The Godfather (I&amp;II)</i> (1972, 1974)	<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i> (1992)	<i>Trading Places</i> (1983)	<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)
8	<i>Pirates of Silicon Valley</i> (1999)	<i>Working Girl</i> (1998)	<i>Wall Street</i> (1987)	<i>How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying</i> (1967)	<i>Once Upon a Time in the West</i> (1968)
9	<i>Clerks</i> (1994)	<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i> (1992)	<i>Tin Men</i> (1987)	<i>Gung Ho</i> (1986)	<i>Goodfellas</i> (1990)
10	<i>Boiler Room</i> (2000)	<i>Office Space</i> (1999)	<i>Modern Times</i> (1936)	<i>Fun with Dick &amp; Jane</i> (1977)	<i>The Godfather I</i> (1972)

Sources: Ackman 2001; Drea 2006; Hartl 2011; Johnston 2007; Karbasfrooshan 2011

Because the Forbes list represents a consensus of opinion, the author believes it is more reliable than lists that specify no criteria for selection. In any case, an effort was made to identify which movies received the largest number of selections across the 5 lists. Only one movie was enumerated on 4 of the 5 lists, and 5 movies were on 3 of the 5 lists. The final selections are noted in Table 2.

**Table 2. Consensus List: The Greatest Business Movies**

#	Name of Film	List Selections
1	<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i> (1992)	4
2	<i>The Godfather I</i> (1972)	3
3	<i>The Godfather II</i> (1974)	3
4	<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)	3
5	<i>Wall Street</i> (1987)	3
6	<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> (1946)	3

## Discussion

To understand the meaning and content of the overall film, the author developed a film evaluation form (Figure 1). The form was constructed based on suggestions from the American Film Institute. According to the American Film Institute's Web site ([www.afi.edu/teachers/resources/](http://www.afi.edu/teachers/resources/)), questions to consider include:

- Is the film adapted from fiction or drama or is it original?
- Are the characters credible?
- Are they appropriately cast?
- Comment on the theme of the film and its relevance to management or business administration. Is the theme supported by the plot, acting, and other elements of the film?
- Is the setting/locale appropriate and effective, and how does it or doesn't it support the concepts of business?
- What kind of ethical implications does the film or a scene in the film present, and how are the ethical dilemmas effectively or ineffectively resolved?

For example, the setting of *Wall Street* (1987) is in this country's financial capital. What about some of the other films and their use of Main Street? Is Main Street also the setting for a mini financial market? Certainly, in the case of *The Godfather Part II*, Las Vegas Boulevard seems to have served in just such a capacity. Ethical implications abound. The casinos were mini markets ripe for looting (or, in the words of the underworld, "skimming") by any well-organized, well-capitalized, coordinated collection of hoodlums as depicted by the "Family Corleone."

Casino gambling was once considered illegal and unethical in most states. Now it is considered ethical and legal, provided various local, state, and federal governments can partake of the largess. Does this make it ethical even though it may be legal?

Students may also want to compare and contrast ethical themes that they noticed were common to two or more films as noted by their film critique forms. They may also wish to frame their responses in terms of an ethical rubric from their textbook. For example, in *The Godfather Part I*, Michael Corleone marries his longtime girlfriend, Kay Adams. Kay presents herself as a person who will not succumb to the criminality associated with the family Corleone and pays a hefty price for the stand she takes and for the effort she makes to shield her children from Michael's criminal stranglehold, as depicted by her actions in *The Godfather Part II*. Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather* (1969) ends with Kay relying on the Catholic Church for guidance, support, and solace. Kay goes to mass daily and prays for her husband's soul just as Mama Corleone prayed daily for her murdered son Vito. Is prayer the antidote for the kind of evil portrayed in these first two movies that form the bulk of the Godfather trilogy? The Catholic Church's religiosity did not seem to quell the violence. Can students come up with other ethical rubrics that are effective?

Perhaps Casali's recent article "Developing a Multidimensional Scale for Ethical Decision Making" (2011) might be useful in that endeavor. Certainly, scales such as "not harming the clients/patients" ranging from "extremely important" to "not important at all" take on a bizarre tinge when unyielding clients, recalcitrant employees, uncooperative staff members, objectionable family relations, and even members of law enforcement are "disposed of" right there on the silver screen. In any case, the film critique forms (Figure 1) should be filled out for each film. To name but six examples, Table 3 cites selected scenes from Hollywood's greatest business movies, explains the ethical dilemma, and poses the resolution as an exercise for those watching the movie. Scenes within these films are specified for their ability to enable the viewers to concentrate their attention on the ethical scenarios. Of course, if viewers can couch their resolution of the scenarios in terms of some sort of ethical framework based on a research article or a textbook, the resolution will be more meaningful.

## **Conclusion**

This study proposes a framework that has the potential of considering a number of ethical dilemmas as presented by Hollywood's greatest business movies and then developing a plan for resolution. By watching these carefully selected scenes, the moral imagination will be stimulated because the scenarios (with the possible exception of *It's a Wonderful Life*) are usually based on real-life occurrences. Recognition of ethical issues is bound to occur because the scenarios present "make a decision now" choices. A sense of moral obligation is developed because decision making obliges the viewer to follow his or her internal code of ethics. The scenarios are typically complicated, requiring analysis to decipher. Finally, the decision maker must live with and tolerate ambiguity because there often isn't one simple answer but there are multiple courses of action. This

sequence is illustrative of the 5 goals that the Hasting Center specifies for a course in ethics (Pameental 1989).

**Figure 1. Ethics in Organizational Behavior Movie Evaluation Form**

**Film Title:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Year ( \_\_\_\_ )**      **Student:** \_\_\_\_\_

#	<i>Item</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	<b>Premise</b>	The premise is the supposition implied in the story. Students should also note if this supposition has implications for the management or business administration concepts noted below (see items 7 and 8).	
2	<b>Characterization</b>	Examines the depth of the personality's beliefs, motivations, desires, etc. Students should also note how this characterization may or may not affect the business issues (for example, some characters seem unconcerned with business ethics and act accordingly).	
3	<b>Structure &amp; Plot</b>	Comment on how the film is put together and how the events are rendered in some sort of structure or order. Again, does this have implications for the business concepts noted below?	
4	<b>Dialogue</b>	Conversation between two or more people. How is the use of dialogue, slang, jargon, and/or language peculiarities supportive of the characterizations noted in item 2?	
5	<b>Originality</b>	An unexpected turning point that attracts attention. Does the originality of these turning points support the structure and plot of the film? If so, how?	
6	<b>Scene</b>	A self-contained episode within a larger work. How does the scene accommodate the business activity as depicted in that particular episode of the film?	
7	<b>Ethical Dilemma and Its Resolution</b>	Explain how the film or a scene in the film presented an ethical dilemma, question, or situation and delineate its resolution by also assessing its effectiveness or lack thereof.	

Source: Dunphy (2011)

**Table 3. Example Scene Dilemmas and Resolutions**

Name of Film	Scene	Ethical Dilemma	Resolution
<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i> (1992)	Alec Baldwin's sales motivation scene 3, "Third prize is you're fired."	Alec Baldwin ("Blake") refers to the sales staff using various epithets that are unprintable but provides a convincing narrative for why said staff should improve their performance.	Is there in fact a double game going on here (and in most businesses)? Are only high performers worthy of rewards, and low performers worthless? Should low performers be used, abused, debased, then tossed like trash as a way to motivate both groups? If not, what is the resolution?
<i>The Godfather I</i> (1972)	Scene 4, "Tom Hagen Goes to Hollywood."	The Godfather's attorney explains to a Hollywood director that "Johnny Fontaine needs a part in the movie." The director disagrees.	This scene shows the process of negotiation, leadership, and coercion under conditions of uncertainty. Forced coercion is usually not a pretty sight. Where should the viewer draw the line? What constraints should be placed on business leaders, dictators, and even elective governments?
<i>The Godfather II</i> (1974)	Disc 2, scene 6, "Michael, you are blind."	Kay explains that she's leaving and taking the children. Michael explains that he will never allow her to take his children from him. Kay reveals that her miscarriage was actually an abortion and that she aborted their son to avoid bringing another child into this cycle of evil.	Was that an appropriate action on Kay's part? What is the way to break from a villainous, circuitous pattern? In subsequent scenes, Kay attempts to seek and find solace and comfort in the Catholic Church. Why is this or isn't this an effective approach to thwarting the evil associated with "The Family Corleone"?

(Continued on next page.)



**Table 3. Example Scene Dilemmas and Resolutions, cont.**

Name of Film	Scene	Ethical Dilemma	Resolution
<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)	Scene 30, "Rosebud," the final scene.	Reporter Thompson reflects that "Mr. Kane was a man who got everything he wanted and then lost it. Maybe Rosebud was something he couldn't get, or something he lost."	It would appear that the capitalistic consumerism model does not work for everyone. What is lost in the quest for power, wealth, and influence? Does what is gained offset what is lost, or, to gain peace of mind, should we all seek our own childlike reawakening to a time of greater simplicity and less strife?
<i>Wall Street</i> (1987)	Scene 17, "Into the Abyss."	Bud Fox enters the offices of his employer, Jackson Steinem & Co., feeling on top of the world as a result of his recent trading success but is soon marched out Mirandized, handcuffed, and in tears.	Senior partner Lou Mannheim asks Bud Fox to look into the abyss and notes, "There's nothing staring back. At that moment, man finds his character—and that is what keeps him out of the abyss." Surely, viewers can come up with better suggestions than looking into "the abyss" to build character.
<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> (1946)	Scene 22, "On the bridge."	George Bailey contemplates suicide while standing on an icy bridge. Angel second class "Clarence" saves George and shows him what life would have been like had he received his wish and never been born.	According to Clarence, "Each man's life touches another's life. When he's not around, it leaves an awful hole." George asks to live again. What implications does the scene have for renewal, rebirth, and redemption?

The proper resolution of these ethical dilemmas should lead to viewer enlightenment. The point is to seek, find, and emulate the film's positive role models while minimizing, abrogating, and denigrating the film's negative role models. In so doing, the viewer should be able to move up the ethical decision-making scale with the result that an improved organizational climate is created for all.

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