

THE WAY WE THINK: ETHICS, HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

Breaches of ethics and social responsibility in domestic and international business are typically thought to be anchored in such phenomena as greed, dishonesty and conflict of interest. While these forces are frequently at work in international business transactions, there is often another major force at work when failures of ethics and social responsibility occur. This article addresses the question of what is it about the way that transnational company managers and government officials think or don't think that leads to breaches of ethics and social responsibility – breaches that often result in major health, environmental and social tragedies. The article considers several cases of breaches in ethics and social responsibility: Texaco's and Shell's oil exploration and development in Ecuador and Nigeria, the Bhopal gas plant explosion in India, Wal-Mart's sourcing of timber from China for manufacture of wood products, the trade in biofuels, the trade in toxic financial instruments, and the China milk crisis. The article discusses the roles of a variety of thought-processes in corporate and governmental decision-making and raises the question of whether we do enough in law schools and in business schools and school of public administration to address how companies and governments and their advisors think.

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