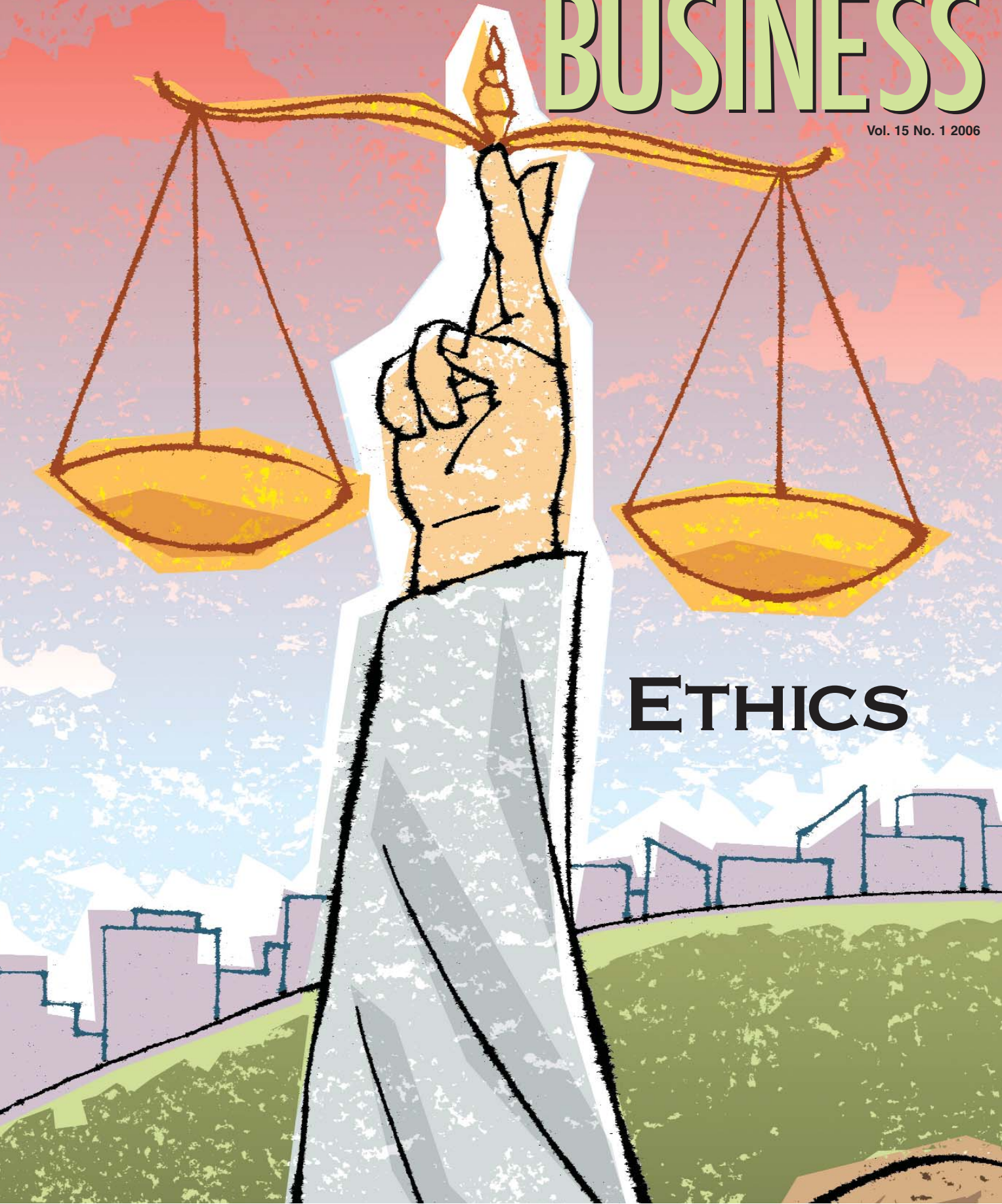


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EDITOR'S NOTE

There is lots of talk about ethics nowadays: ethics in business, government, personal dealings, and even the family setting. Unfortunately, much of the discussion centers on a lack of ethical behavior across the board. Have individuals and society in general lost their sense of honest, aboveboard, straightforward behavior? Certainly not entirely, but enough to raise red warning flags everywhere.

Ours has been referred to as the "cheating culture." Cheating is pervasive in many places. It is not unusual for businesses and individuals to cheat on their taxes. It is commonplace for employees to bring home office supplies for personal use. Many students knowingly download Internet music illegally, justifying it as only a minor wrong. Surveys suggest cheating and plagiarism are rampant on college campuses.

The business world has been rocked by ethical failures, most notably Enron and WorldCom. In both cases, investors lost millions of dollars when stock prices fell because of fraudulent financial reporting. Consequently, there has been a growing loss of confidence in America's big businesses.

Ethical failures resemble the addictive process: they start out small and then slowly but surely progress to bigger infractions—with more frequency and more devastating consequences. Ethical breaches also resemble the addictive model in that they are chronic and progressive and end in disaster.

To counter the ethical abuses of corporations, university business schools now routinely teach business ethics courses. These courses are needed to arm students with an ethical framework for making moral as well as legal decisions when they formally enter the business world. However, business ethics courses alone cannot clean up the "cheating culture." Many things have to change; first the higher-ups at a company—the officers and board of directors—need to set the example of ethical responsibility.

Capping off the ethical dilemma is the current nasty image of Tennessee politics. Shocking and disgusting were the arrests last spring of one former and four current legislators on charges of accepting bribes in exchange for their votes on legislation. Most of those cases—as well as the scandals surrounding the Tennessee Highway Patrol—are still pending.

In response to ethical problems in state government, both the governor and the legislature initiated panels to make recommendations. Governor Bredesen has called a special legislative session, beginning January 10, to address the matter of ethics. It is difficult to predict what the legislature's final package will be, but surely it will produce some improvement.

It is feared that too much emphasis will be placed on the usual whipping boys: lobbyists who try to influence legislation on behalf of themselves, their employers, or their clients. Lobbyists have a genuine right to advocate their positions to legislators but should do so in an ethical manner. It should not be forgotten that lobbyists do not force legislators or other government officials to do wrong; they are ultimately responsible for their own actions.

The major focus of ethics reform must be on lawmakers. The criteria for reform are simple: set clear rules for lobbyists and legislators, require precise reporting of anything with monetary value, conduct all legislative business in the open, assign a panel independent of the legislature to oversee it, and especially, as often as possible, elect honest politicians to public office.

—Horace Johns, editor

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