It’s a Wednesday afternoon in March. Spring is in the air, the campus is in bloom, and in Room 222 of Management Hall, the class is wrestling with right and wrong.

“So we’ve got lying, stealing, cheating,” Professor Bart Victor says, summing up a host of ethical breakdowns that plagued eye-care giant Bausch & Lomb in the 1980s and ‘90s, and which directly led to a slump in the company’s fortunes. “Sounds like a country song.” A beat. “Without ethics, you know, there would be no country music.” Big laugh. Welcome to the Ethics in Business course, spring 2003.

Bart Victor, the Cal Turner Professor of Moral Leadership at the Owen Graduate School of Management, keeps the mood light, roaming around the cozy amphitheater-style classroom like a standup comic visiting tables at a nightclub, tossing out the occasional quip. But there’s serious thinking going on here, too, as he asks tough questions and pushes the class of about 40 MBA students to confront the inevitable friction that comes from the Golden Rule bumping up against the Profit Motive.

For about 20 minutes during the 90-minute session, Victor turns the class over to three students, who assess where B&L went wrong and how the company could have stayed on the straight and narrow. In their PowerPoint presentation, they display a bombshell of a directive from B&L CEO Daniel Gill about meeting the company’s quarterly sales goals: “Make the numbers, but don’t do anything stupid.” As one of the student presenters notes, it certainly looks like a rather transparent code for “Don’t get caught.”

As the three students wrap up their presentation, a series of questions comes from a classmate: But why is making your numbers wrong? Isn’t that standard business practice? If you’re a company that disregards the numbers, are you going to be around very long?”

Hearing this, Bart Victor’s face lights up, and he says, “Now you’ve got something there,” and he urges the students to grapple with the issue. The student presenters do a creditable job of fielding these tough, fundamental questions and, challenged by the professor, the class openly discusses just what is considered acceptable behavior in pursuit of business goals. But as the session winds down, it’s clear that “making the numbers”—and how one does that—is the heart of the matter.

“You’re going to have the responsibility for sales targets,” Bart Victor reminds the twenty-something students. “You’re going to be responsible for people’s behavior, even when you can’t watch them.”

Anyone put off by the pious ring of “professor of moral leadership” would be immediately disarmed upon meeting Bart Victor. On a spring morning in his third-floor Owen office, dressed casually in khakis, loafers and black polo shirt, with his feet occasionally propped on a pulled-out desk drawer, the 48-year-old business professor seems nearly as unguarded and informal as the students he teaches. At the same time, though, his conversation crackles with a vibrancy and a quickness of mind that is infectious.

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[Suggested Reading]
They will use words without meanings. They will hide behind empty phrases. Make them accountable. (12 pages)

Edmund Burke, "Letter to the Senators of Bretonville." The best leaders will help keep us free by telling us what we truly need to hear—not just what we want to hear. We need their judgment, and not just their echo. (35 pages)

Samuel Johnson, Number 21, The Rambler. Freedom of speech and thought are the properties of human nature. Each image that we are superior in some ways to others. We are not. Be humble. (5 pages)

Immanuel Kant, "On Perpetual Peace." Despite our nature, despite our frailties, we can be better than we are. Thus, the world can be better than it is. Keep trying. (33 pages)

Henry David Thoreau, "On Seeing," from his Journal. Try to see. Seeing is understanding. "We cannot see anything until we are possessed of the idea of it, and then we can hardly see anything else." Keep looking. (3 pages)

Plutarch, "On Contentment." Look not for fame or fortune. Fame is hollow. Fortune is fickle. We must find contentment in life no matter what blows life deals us. Keep living. (28 pages)

Soren Kierkegaard, The Story of Abraham. How do we define the virtues or moral rights—or any of the ethical issues lie and how they come up. Where do they really come from? (28 pages)