The Boston Globe
Ethics Crisis:
Muddied Standards,
Muddled Management

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This is a classic ethics story, one in which a profitable and well-respected company lost its way. It is the story of an ethical crisis that top executives mishandled at every possible point—not because they were bad people, but because in an effort to be overly fair, they forgot that the fairest management response in a culture based on values is one of consistency.

The story is about a daily newspaper and a popular columnist, but that’s almost irrelevant. Substitute “technology company” and “top salesman,” “law firm” and “rainmaker,” “hospital” and “prominent surgeon”—or any other combination of an organization and its superstar—and you could have the same tale of woe.

The following is what happens when a company lacks consistent response to, and enforcement of, its core values and standards.

The summer of 1998 was not a good one for the Boston Globe, New England’s most dominant newspaper. Looking back, critics could say that in three short months the paper needlessly self-destructed.

For the past thirty years, the Globe had built a stellar reputation and a circulation to match. Under one editor alone, it won 12 Pulitzer prizes. The paper attracted the best reporters, took an aggressive

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stance on civic issues, and in all categories outshone its cross-town rival, the *Boston Herald*.

In 1973 the *Globe* hired a brash young writer named Mike Barnicle, who soon began writing columns that championed Boston’s working class. Cops, single mothers, gas station owners, elderly immigrants and young veterans found themselves reflected in his prose. As Barnicle’s voice grew more powerful, so did his clout within the paper. As one writer described him, “He was not even 30, yet he fashioned himself as a self-made newspaper hero unafraid of his bosses.”

Even as the paper promoted him as Boston’s Jimmy Breslin, Barnicle’s critics said he pushed the envelope of journalistic standards. The *Globe* settled at least two lawsuits alleging that Barnicle fabricated quotes attributed to real people. Chicago’s famed columnist Mike Royko complained Barnicle was copying his work. Staffers complained he was arrogant and aloof, all while earning an estimated $200,000 salary at the *Globe* and a near equal amount for television commentary. He hobnobbed with actor Robert Redford, the Kennedys and O’Neills, and media stars Tim Russert and Don Imus.

If Mike Barnicle filled a void at the *Globe* by speaking for the common man, the paper’s editors were acutely aware that its ranks were thin when it came to minority staff. In 1990, the paper welcomed a young black writer and poet, Patricia Smith, who in 1994 was given a coveted columnist position. Unfortunately, Smith’s past record was not free from blemishes, and after questions arose about the veracity of her column material, the *Globe*’s editors decided that a reminder was in order. To avoid the appearance of favoritism, in January 1996 editor Matthew V. Storin reminded Smith and Barnicle about the *Globe*’s “rules of the road.” They had to write truthful columns and provide backup to verify their contents. Everyone was now on equal footing.

If that sounds like basic “journalistic standard 101,” it should. The problem was that the standard had apparently never been uniformly applied or enforced. To have fired Smith in 1996, Storin would have had to confront Barnicle, something he was unwilling to do. Storin admitted to his own media critic that people said Mike Barnicle made things up. But Storin also acknowledged that he never had reason to doubt the authenticity of Barnicle’s columns.
So the loose standards continued, the Globe pretending its columnists were writing the truth and some of its columnists pretending to write the truth. In fact, in the midst of staff complaints to editors about Smith's work, Storin nominated her for a Pulitzer.

But in June 1998 the façade cracked. One doubting and diligent editor amassed persuasive evidence that Smith had been writing fiction instead of newspaper columns. When confronted, Smith admitted to the fabrications and resigned on June 18.

So a company took a little longer than it should to dismiss an untruthful employee. Is that so bad?

No, that's only the misdemeanor. The ethical felony followed, shortly after the predictable community outrage over the firing of a black female writer and the double standard the paper permitted for its white male "recidivist fabricator and serial plagiarist" (a description that one of Barnicle's column subjects offered).²

By July, when it seemed the Globe would ride out the Patricia Smith storm, Storin left for vacation in Italy. Enter the classic ethics case, with all its elements.

**Surprise.** The worst ethical crises happen without warning. On August 2, Barnicle's column consisted of a series of funny one-liners prefaced by, "I was just thinking..." An alert reader tipped the Globe's competitor, the Boston Herald, that several of Barnicle's quips came from George Carlin's book, *Brain Droppings.*

**A public free-for-all.** Ethical scandals are wrenching even if they are played out in the privacy of the corner office. Perhaps the board is informed, but after the fact, and perhaps the final press release gives a clue announcing the resignation of an individual "for personal reasons." If the individual is unimportant, the resignation may go unnoticed.

The ethics case of the Boston Globe and Mike Barnicle involved the worst-case scenario. Not only was the scandal fresh material for the media and every opinion leader, the competition broke the story. Its front page headlines screamed the news, while Herald columnists and reporters embellished the burgeoning scandal with more fodder to feed the media frenzy, predicting an editorial shakeup and chastising Barnicle for past sins. Soon the weekly Boston Phoenix, the leading alternative newspaper, chimed in with
its own in-depth reporting on Barnicle, while the influential *Boston Magazine* revived its 1991 "Barnicle Watch."

The media excitement continued as Barnicle argued jokes are impossible to source and denied ever reading the Carlin book. Storin, from his vacation retreat, immediately decided to suspend Barnicle for a month, playing into the public attention and feeding the debate about whether the *Globe*’s journalistic standards were uniformly applied, since they had forced Smith’s resignation a few months earlier.

The punishment turned out to be too little, too soon. Just a few hours later, a Boston television station ran a clip of Barnicle holding up the Carlin book and recommending it to viewers as a good summer read.

Now the *Globe*’s editors felt they had been lied to. Storin, again calling from Italy, demanded Barnicle’s resignation.

One has to wonder what Storin was thinking, knowing the personality of his star columnist. Perhaps Storin thought if he asked nicely, Barnicle would say yes. Barnicle refused to resign and instead mounted a public defense that he might have argued privately to Storin, if given the chance.

**A superstar offender.** A superstar in or causing trouble is bad enough, but if the superstar engenders strong feelings, not all positive, the case is tougher to deal with. In the *Globe*’s case, its high profile sinner was described as aloof, contemptuous, and lazy. Barnicle had “played by his own set of rules and gotten away with it,” according to one observer. Barnicle, who by this time was a regular on such popular shows as Imus in the Morning and *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, was a well known public figure. Opinions were rarely neutral about the columnist; fans loved his brash, contemptuous view of the world but others thought his ego had overtaken his renowned writing skill. His own words in a 1983 interview captured his personality: “I got license, freedom, nobody breathing down my back. Hey, I’m a lucky bastard. It’s a fuckin’ pissser, isn’t it?”

**Prior warnings to the offender.** Barnicle’s career was described by the *Boston Phoenix* as “marked by numerous instances of borderline plagiarism, legal problems sparked by apparently egregious misquotes and . . . credible accusations that
he faked some of his columns." Reporters digging into Barnicle’s misdeeds uncovered a $40,000 payment for a 1973 column, and a $75,000 settlement paid to Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz for another column. A 1993 column about two rogue policemen appeared too strange to be true but apparently Barnicle’s editors never double-checked the account.

In the aftermath of longstanding questions about Barnicle’s writing habits, the “rules of the road” discussion and fact-checking system Storin instituted in 1996 perhaps should have been the last sermon to the sinner. But are plagiarized jokes the same as fictionalized news? No one had a clear answer.

**A popular referendum on ethics.** Tough ethical decisions should be made in the privacy of the office, after thorough investigation and careful reflection. In the case of the *Boston Globe*, by asking for Barnicle’s resignation rather than firing him, or by refusing to suspend him for a longer period while they investigated, the paper lit a fire with gasoline. Barnicle took to the airwaves, pleading his case on talk radio and national television. Don Imus’s listeners were urged to contact the *Globe* with support for the columnist. Soon the voicemails and e-mails at the *Globe* were full. Everyone in Boston, it seemed, had an opinion on the Barnicle affair and was not hesitant to express it. Barnicle urged a public vote on his column and the *Globe* was powerless to stop its columnist’s campaign.

**Outside pressure on the decisionmakers.** Should an ethical decision rest upon the prestige of those arguing various points of view? Should a law or accounting firm bend to its biggest client; should a company bend to its biggest customer or its sole supplier? Consistent standards and enforcement are good insurance against this happening. The *Globe*, lacking clearly articulated values, was ripe for advertiser pressure that soon materialized. Thomas G. Stemberg, CEO of the office-supply chain Staples, subtly threatened to pull his advertising, proclaiming that Barnicle’s column was a “key element of the *Globe*’s attractiveness as an advertising vehicle.”

The pressure apparently worked. Barnicle halted his media tour in time to meet with publisher Benjamin B. Taylor on August 7th. The following week Storin returned from vacation to meet with Barnicle and Taylor. On August 11, Storin announced that the
Globe had changed its mind. Its executives would not seek Barnicle’s resignation, but would suspend him for two months.

The rationale? “Though there were clear offenses and violations of professional standards, I did not feel . . . that the punishment fit the crime,” Storin said.7

Say that one more time? Clear violations of standards but we changed our mind? No wonder the Globe staff and the community were confused. Storin and Taylor had only muddied the ethical waters.

**Allegations of double standards, complicated by bias.** Having consistent standards and enforcement makes it easier to deal with an individual who has transgressed. Having no clear standards makes the judgment call that much harder. Having no clear standards, and having applied what few standards there were unevenly, only compounds the chaos. The Globe created chaos, complicated by racial and gender bias, when it forced Patricia Smith to resign and then only suspended Mike Barnicle. Black community leaders were vocal, not because Smith was sent packing, but because Barnicle was not. African-American staffers at the Globe were particularly upset.

**No company support.** One test of the integrity of an ethical decision is whether the brass can explain it to the troops. The Globe troops, by and large, were not happy with its management’s flip-flop on ethics and the decision to retain Barnicle. The Globe’s ombudsman, Jack Thomas, wrote an editorial denouncing the double standard, arguing that both columnists compromised the ethics of the newspaper and damaged its credibility. As Globe writer Howard Manley said, “That they are willing to risk the work of an entire newsroom to save one person is unbelievable.”

**Allegations of protection.** The following is a recipe for disaster: mix apparently serious ethical lapses, one superstar and an alleged double standard, and stir up community opinion. Bake for two weeks and you get allegations of protection. The Barnicle fiasco seemed to demonstrate that the Globe had a culture of protection and corruption. Storin covered up Smith’s lapses as early as 1995, yet recommended her for the Pulitzer in 1998. His critics claimed

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Barnicle had been protected for years by a series of editors and publishers. Perhaps Boston Magazine stated it best: The newspaper allowed its columnists to be “shielded by institutional hubris that crippled the moral authority of the Globe, which eventually found it impossible to reveal the truth without also admitting complicity.”

**Divided we fall.** When a full-scale ethical scandal erupts, threatening the integrity and core of an institution, its managers must be united in their view of the situation and the core values they wish to enforce. It appeared to outsiders that Barnicle was able to divide his bosses with alternating anger (against the predators who decided to take 25 years of his work and use it as “target practice”) and humility. While Storin was still in Italy on vacation, Barnicle met with publisher Taylor, apparently pleading his case and promising to be quiet. So, by the time Storin came back, the perception was that Taylor won when Storin bravely announced Barnicle’s reinstatement with only a suspension, insisting to readers that the columnist was now on a “high wire without a net.” There would be no room for future ethical lapses.

But the Globe was silent about past ethical lapses and the investigators weren’t yet finished.

**Rush to judgment.** Complicated situations deserve the luxury of time and attention. Granted, making and articulating clear decisions is hard when the competing press is breathing down your neck, but one of the great mysteries in the Globe case is why the editors didn’t just suspend Barnicle for several months in the beginning, demand his silence, and investigate him fully.

The public outcry over the Globe’s apparent cave-in to Barnicle only served to bring out his critics. A Readers Digest executive notified the Globe that it had researched a 1995 Barnicle column in the hopes of reprinting it and could not verify it. The Globe knew about the accusations but waited until Barnicle was at his summer home, without his notebooks, before demanding the backup for the column. The next day the Globe decided it couldn’t wait and demanded his resignation again.

Barnicle quit. “It became a feeding frenzy,” he said, explaining that he no longer wanted to be the issue distracting a great metropolitan paper from its daily work.
Further criticisms followed: Barnicle had plagiarized from a book about Louisiana Governor Earl Long; Barnicle had lied about his resume. Like a fighter reeling from the punches, Barnicle still tried to fight back, asking the Globe to run a final column arguing his case, as Patricia Smith had done. When it refused, he offered to pay $36,000 for a full-page ad. It still refused, relenting only two months later, running his op-ed piece, in which he distinguished between news stories and “true” stories, “flawed in the retelling.”

Above all, unclear standards, unenforced. By now Storin might have figured out that the Globe’s summer of hell began long before, when the paper developed a reputation as a haven for underworked brats. He had a golden opportunity to raise professional standards when he took over in 1996, but seemed to fear confronting powerful and popular favorites. He ducked the issue of whether rules for columnists could be clear, saying, “columnists of that nature have been a kind of gray area.”

Admitting that questioning Smith about her columns would also raise many of the past suspicions about Barnicle, Storin seems to have missed the point that it was his own lack of clear standards or enforcement that caused the subsequent problem with Barnicle. But Storin did understand that his own muddiness may have confused Smith and led to her relaxed attitude about truthfulness: “It may have been the noise about Mike, unfair though it may be, that gave her the wrong impression,” he said.

So Storin preferred to take the nonconfrontational way out, keeping standards loose, challenging no one until the suspicions were so grave, or the public voices so loud, that he could not ignore them. Perhaps he was only following the prevailing culture, as most Americans give journalists low marks for integrity. In a study released after the Globe’s imbroglio and other television and newspaper scandals, nearly 90 percent of those surveyed said they believe reporters use illegal or unethical methods, and over 65 percent said they believe stories are fabricated and published as real.

Some institutions are blessed to have individuals with high standards of their own, and the Globe was no exception. Eileen McNamara, a 1997 Pulitzer winner, approached Executive Editor Helen Donovan with her concerns about Smith when she heard Storin was submitting the young columnist’s work for a Pulitzer. When Smith resigned, McNamara tackled the issue of standards
again in an unequivocal column. Rejecting the notion that Smith
was forced out because of bias, McNamara stated, on the contrary,
"It was the worst sort of racism that kept us from confronting the
fraud we long suspected. If we did ask, and she did tell, we might
lose her, and where would we be then? Where would we find an
honest black woman columnist who wrote with such power and
grace?"16

Howell Raines, in an editorial for the Globe’s parent company,
The New York Times, also understood basic journalism values and
criticized what he called the double standard at the Globe prior to
Barnicle’s resignation. "If you have to choose between a worthy but
erring colleague and the newspaper itself, you choose for the paper.
After all, all the members of this profession know the rules when we
sign up."17

Well, maybe. Mike Barnicle either forgot the rules, if they were
ever explained to him, or convinced himself that what he was writing
was parable. But everyone is human. It is up to management to
remind employees of the rules and the values for which the com-
pany stands. By failing to state or enforce clear standards, The
Globe’s management failed Mike Barnicle, its readers and itself.

Mike Barnicle himself said so, long after he was fired. "Recon-
struction dialogue in a 1995 column is a clear failure to abide by
today’s standards. It was not always so but is now."18

And the cost of not being clearly told what the standard was and
the punishment for not abiding by it? "Banishment from the place
where I’ve spent most of my adult life. My penalty was to have my
work, my life—private and professional—savored."19

It could happen to anyone. It is a lesson for all.

NOTES

1998, 55.

2. Alan Dershowitz, “Why I’ve Not Yet Been Vindicated,” Boston Maga-

3. Dan Kennedy, “Twenty-five years of trouble,” The Boston Phoenix, 13
August 1998.

4. Dan Kennedy, “Barnicle’s Game,” The Boston Phoenix, 13 August
1998.
5. Ibid.
8. Kennedy, "Barnicle's Game."
14. Ibid.
19. Ibid.