

Can we one good day prevent business scandals from happening? VW's cheating on car emissions.

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There seems to be no end to scandals in businesses, the latest one being VW cheating on diesel emissions tests. What I find especially interesting is what businesses moves to go the 'wrong' way. It may help to research when this course of action began. Maybe many years ago with one small step like a failure in the software that measured 99% emissions instead of the full hundred. Perhaps it was a mistake and perhaps it was neglected or not noticed or someone considered it later as too costly to adjust the software, because, hey, what's 1%? (Hard to imagine that the miscalculation would have started off intentionally. Can you imagine a project aiming at creating software NOT measuring half or double or 35 as much of the pollutants excreted by cars?) And when, after a while, customers or regulators didn't complain people became sloppy about the 'failing' software so a few more percentages were added to the first.. Perhaps improving the software wasn't a clear responsibility for any particular employee or manager and they merely pointed at each other.

However it started, it somehow became a habit and people might have washed their conscience clean with arguments like: all car companies are all doing this, we've always been super reliable, can we please falter a little bit too, it's a tough time economically, we'll adjust the tools later when we have sold so many cars, or when we have reached our goal to become the no 1 car manufacturer because if we fail we make us look bad... Arguments we all know when it's getting tough? The scam probably wasn't considered a scam, the wording will have been different and perhaps they still are, norms and values shifted on a slippery slope. Until it was too big and too many people were involved that it couldn't go unnoticed. I wonder why it took so long before it all came out. "Researchers found emissions of up to 35 times the US standard for one pollutant, nitrogen oxide." Wow.. Amazing that it was kept indoors. Strong culture?

Trust is a good thing between manufacturers and consumers, but it needs to be proven by tests, and it is a mature attitude to really want to be tested, to be open to that. In my view not only VW as a company failed but also the regulators and consumer organizations. We all failed. I believe it is our shared concern to stop others from making mistakes, purely from the knowledge that we are all human and prone to fear of losing money and status, to desires and even greed. Scams don't come out of the blue, they start with ordinary and acceptable concerns. We need to protect each other from that and we need to learn not to be afraid of audits. It's a human story and scandals keeps happening over and over. It's kind of numbing sometimes.. and that's not a mood I like to stay in. Can't we prevent these things from occurring all together? Perhaps a systems view can help ethics here.

I am looking forward to see a movie about VW one day, preferably made in Berlin and not in Hollywood, it might more realistic.. and Germans are good at soul searching in my view and this would be a good time to go ahead with that. It will be fascinating to see how it unfolded step by step into the 'wrong' direction, so we all can learn and not keep hanging in judgments about right and wrong. That also doesn't feel good. Yes, it's a big disappointment, being cheated never feels right and you want get the money back etc. It would be great if VW could open up and tell us all about it. It would be brave and we'd all benefit. But it takes a little bravery from everyone involved as well to be really interested in the human story behind the events. Perhaps we wouldn't like what we encounter, namely that it's all so understandable, that in their place we might have done the same. And that helps us to be aware of our own possible moral flaws that could one day become a scam within our own firm if we hadn't taken the opportunity to learn from others who went astray. In my view this is a basic and a good way to rebuild societal trust.