

# Do the Right Thing: Make Ethics Your Brand

By Jeffrey G. Collins, self-published (2014),  
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Reviewed by John R. Runyan

**F**ormer U.S. Attorney Jeffrey G. Collins has written a short but delightful primer on character, ethics, and civility. He draws on his diverse experiences as a criminal defense attorney, Detroit Records Court judge, presiding judge of the Wayne County Circuit Criminal Division, Michigan Court of Appeals judge, partner in two or three major Detroit law firms, deputy Wayne County executive, and his three-year stint as United States attorney in Detroit. A former collegiate tennis player at Northwestern University, Collins uses sports (primarily baseball) metaphors throughout his book to illustrate the ethical principles he holds most dear:

What makes amateur tennis unique is the code of conduct. There are no umpires. There are no referees. Players are left to call the lines themselves. Players have to police their own conduct. There could come a key time in the match when your opponent hits a ball that lands right on the line. If you call it “out” you will win the point and possibly the match. The call you make is final. There is no appeal. If you call the ball “in” you will lose the point and possibly the match. For the novice, this could present an ethical dilemma.

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Making the right call time and time again builds ethical character and it builds your brand. Playing competitive tournament tennis taught me to take pride in making trustworthy judgments. I learned early to take pride in doing the right thing. (pp 12–13)

Starting with “Spring Training,” the adolescent experiences which help to shape

one’s character, Collins describes how his mother made him apologize to a grocery store cashier when he shoplifted a candy bar as a six-year-old. He poignantly recounts how he struggled to gain law school admission, drawing inspiration from his father, a pediatrician for more than 50 years in his class at the University of Michigan Medical School. Collins also talks about how he overcame his fear of public speaking by practicing endlessly to speak without notes.

For me, however, the book’s high point is Collins’ description of how he introduced his brand of ethics to the cesspool that was Wayne County government. Remember that when his ship was sinking, former Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano brought Collins on board to add an air of legitimacy to his administration. Collins describes how he tackled the problems head on, establishing a new Wayne County ethics policy, changing the management style of the Ficano administration, and taking a principled stand against a supposed across-the-board 10 percent wage cut—which would have been only half that for highly compensated officials within the administration who would have continued to receive a generous mileage allowance.

Another inspiring anecdote, although not particularly illuminating from an ethical perspective, is Collins’ story about his role as U.S. attorney in Detroit—a metropolitan area of approximately 200,000 persons of Middle Eastern descent—in the aftermath of 9/11. Collins recounts how he and other government officials began meeting regularly with the directors of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the NAACP, and the ACLU. An organization called BRIDGES ultimately grew out of these

meetings and became the model for similar organizations nationwide.

Collins’ writing is simple and direct. He has a gift for drawing lessons about ethics and character from everyday events—from Little League parents whose first question to their children is “Did you win?” to the anonymous good Samaritan who helped him rehydrate when he passed out during his first marathon. If there is a weakness, it may be a tendency toward oversimplification. Collins’ penchant for labels like *slickster*, *enabler*, *cynic*, *super hero*, *shepherds*, and *strays* distracts from rather than enriches the wonderful anecdotes he retells throughout the book. If life’s choices—both at work and play—were as black and white as Collins makes them appear, ethical decision-making would be a lot easier. Unfortunately, unlike a line call in tennis, some balls are not clearly in or out.

Still, Collins’ book is a quick, enjoyable read. He has made a valuable contribution to literature on a subject that needs to be told and retold. If they are still living, his parents are undoubtedly proud of the ethically sensitive and morally astute young man they raised. ■



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