



The Dallas Morning News

DallasNews.com

Reprinted from Monday, April 7, 2003

Robert Rose: Most execs are getting a bad rap

Wonder why business is so bad?" has replaced sports as the favorite topic over evening drinks. One of my friends recently said, into his second glass of Chablis, "After Enron and Andersen, no one has faith in business." For some reason that night, that common observation sank in and made me both sad and angry. If people really have reached that conclusion, Saddam Hussein isn't our primary concern.

Don't get me wrong. Criminals in Enron, Andersen or any other business should be punished in proportion to the harm they have done to individuals and families. Were it up to me, some would be punished beyond their worst dreams. But do the Enron and Andersen debacles mean we should have no faith in business?

Over the last 30 years, I have been a consultant to every kind of business, from international enterprises to mom-and-pop operations. And to quote Jules, the philosophical hit man of *Pulp Fiction*, "Oh? Allow me to retort."

Not all Enron executives are Enron, and not all Andersen partners are Andersen, not in the pejorative sense those names have taken on.

I have been on the job for only 9,841 days, which may explain why I never have encountered the many executives who supposedly plot to destroy the environment and ravish their employees

with the aid of their accounting henchmen.

On the other hand, I have seen hundreds of chief executive officers who want to be fair to employees and clients. If they err, it often is in the direction of giving an employee a third and fourth chance when the second wasn't necessary. When they do a bad job for a client, they apologize and try to make it right.

Most business is small business, but I have been in meetings of large, publicly traded companies where executives have debated for hours whether their businesses were serving the community's best interests. At a meeting of one large company, the chief operating officer warned his vice presidents, "If I catch you polluting, I will turn you over to the cops myself."

I have worked with 40 or so accounting firms. Partners take their accounting code of ethics very seriously. They are famous for writing down billings (charging for less than the hours actually worked) rather than taking a chance on gouging the clients. Partners often are well paid but always last paid; in bad years, they make nothing.

Business leaders are much like you and I. They like Dilbert and laugh at themselves when the strip is too true. To the extent they differ, I find they are a bit more impatient, a bit more temperamental and a bit kinder. I have run across some slimy people in business, but

probably about the same proportion you run across in your place of worship.

My firm has worked on government projects and met some competent and industrious people. Both my parents were, and many of my friends are, employed by the government. But how do the majority stack up against their business counterparts? Check for yourself. Visit some of your local, state or federal government agencies. After you have done that, the next time someone says, "We need to control selfish and inefficient business leaders with government agencies," you will laugh until your knees ache.

Yes, we are in good hands, and if that makes you snicker, by all means let's have a showdown. You tell me how many business leaders you have worked with, and I will see if I can't match it. Bring your money with you.

An appropriate level of distrust is good sense rather than paranoia. Yes, let's ferret out crooked executives. Let's be skeptical about overblown claims by anyone. But to stop trusting the foundation of America - business - is dangerous and just plain stupid.

Robert G. Rose is a principal with the Dallas-based Rose Consulting Group.