

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/how-do-you-want-to-be-remembered>

Meg Whitman describes two moments during her tenure as president and CEO of eBay when the e-commerce site was faced with having to make choices that would reveal the company's values and character. eBay's leadership ultimately agreed to ban the sale of Nazi memorabilia and bootleg copies of a violent video game. Whitman underscores the importance of always doing what's right, because "the only thing you take with you, through your career, is your reputation."



## Transcript

- The one thing that you have in your career is your reputation.. What do you stand for? Howard Schultz, who is the founder and CEO of Starbucks, sat on my board at Ebay, and we had one very difficult decision that we had to make, and I'll tell you that decision.. Back at Ebay, we were really run by largely a Libertarian perspective.. If the item or the category of goods was legal for sale in the country in which we were doing business then it was legal for sale on Ebay, and Howard Schultz came to one board meeting and he said, "You know Meg, I'm deeply concerned "that there is Nazi memorabilia for sale on Ebay." So it turns out that Nazi memorabilia is perfectly legal for sale in the United States.. It is not legal for sale in Germany, it's not legal for sale in France, it's not legal for sale in many countries, but in the United States it is legal for sale.. And so Nazi memorabilia was legal for sale on Ebay.. And he said, "Meg, I just think "this isn't the right thing to do." And Pierre, Jeff Skoll, who was Pierre Omidyar's co-founder, actually took the opposite point of view.. He said, but it's a slippery slope.. If you ban Nazi memorabilia then what's the next thing that you have to ban, and what does that lead you into? - And Howard said, "I don't know.. "I know I can solve this problem." And he looked at me and he said, "Meg, what do you want the character of the company to be?" And in the end we decided to ban Nazi memorabilia..

We decided to ban firearms, tobacco, alcohol, I mean we then got into a situation of making judgment calls about things that we wanted to ban, but the guiding principle is, what's the character of the company? And it was an incredibly instructive lesson for the company and it set us on an entirely different path.. I'll give you another example.. In the early days of Ebay there was something called the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.. Probably some of you know that.. The law states that if you have a very large site with lots of things on it, if you police the site you are legally liable for the things that appear on your site.. If you do not police the site you're good to go.. That anything that shows up on your site, you exercise the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.. In the early days of Ebay there were bootleg copies of video games that were appearing on the site, and there was one particularly that had escaped one of the big video game company's laboratories called Cop Killer, and I got called in front of the CEOs of all the video game companies and they said, Meg, you've got to police the site.. You know, we can't have Cop Killer on the site, this is not something that we think should be out there.. And I said well, you know the Digital Millennium Copyright Act..

I went back to the board that afternoon, I explained the situation.. I said, "But you know we can't really "do anything about it because of the "Digital Millennium Copyright Act." And then again the board said, "Meg, what's the right thing to do here?" What's the right thing to do? And someone also said, "You can't let "the lawyers run the company." And so that afternoon, and I looked at Pierre, and he said, "Gee, this is a tough one.. "I mean, you know, this is a tough one "but do what you think is the right thing to do." And so that afternoon we actually started policing the site and took off all the infringing, illegal items like that video game.. So I only give you those two examples because in the end who you are, what you stand for, when the going gets tough do you do the right thing? And I would encourage you to do that, because while it may be inconvenient, while you may lose your job, while you may have to leave the company you're working for, in the end it is who you are and it is your reputation, and the only thing you take with you through your career is your reputation.. And the people that you meet on the way up are the same people you meet on the way down, and so I think the other last bit of advice in addition to character is, you know what, treat other people like you would like to be treated.. And always extend that helping hand because it will come back to you...