**Ethical Shades of Gray  
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If you are thinking about the racy best-seller, you’re on the wrong track. Even so, ethical challenges can be dicey and not all issues are clearly delineated as black-and-white.

Dr. Marilyn Tam, a very successful entrepreneur who led prestigious companies like Reebok, Aveda and Nike, recently spoke to OK Ethics members. Dr. Tam was born into a grueling life as the youngest female child of a Chinese family. As she put it, a “bad position” in a society holding little regard for women.

Her mother left her at the hospital for days and, later, shipped her off to live with an uncle. Dr. Tam used these dire circumstances as motivation to make the world a better place. Today, she runs the international non-profit Us Foundation.

On the road to achieving her dreams, Dr. Tam found herself in another tenuous position while working as an executive for a multi-million dollar company. Because of his immoral behavior, she adamantly opposed the candidacy of a hot shot new leader. Even though they were equally concerned, each of her peers feared for their own job security, so they refused to speak up. That left Dr. Tam as the only opposition. Nevertheless, her boss believed that he could coach the candidate past the overwhelming baggage of sexual harassment and character flaws. Dr. Tam wanted to be fair to her boss and loyal to her company, so she waited and watched.

After ten months, Dr. Tam recommended the company invest in Kleenex. Why? Because there were so many people suffering, weeping and begging for transfers away from the new executive’s monstrous misbehavior. Her conscience prompted her to quit - without even having a new job lined up.

As Dr. Tam explained to her boss, “You cannot put ink in a clear pitcher of water and expect it to ever be clean again.”

No surprise that the company fell into the hands of a competitor, but Dr. Tam was promptly recruited by Aveda to serve as their CEO. As she demonstrated, we are often confronted by issues that have the illusion of gray, but closer examination reveals that they are actually black and white. Seeing clearly requires being courageously true to our values - especially when the stakes are high.

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