



## INTERVIEW: Conscious Business

Meeting Fred Kofman for the first time, you might not guess from his serene and unassuming manner that he was an acclaimed “Teacher of the Year” at MIT and the University of California. Or that his life mission today is nothing less than a revolution in corporate America – using the power of such “spiritual” values as mindfulness, compassion, and personal integrity. A noble yet impossible dream? We spoke with him to find out.

**Sounds True:** How did you come to realize the importance of what you call “conscious business?”

**Fred Kofman:** I first realized the importance of consciousness by experiencing the dangers of unconsciousness. I grew up in Argentina in the 1970s, when it was plagued by denial. We were all assuming that things were fine – and they were, on the surface – and yet we all knew that the country was very ill at the core. And yet we all wanted to believe that the shiny surface was the truth. For a while that worked and the society was operating normally while, at the same time, there were concentration camps, people being tortured and murdered, right in our midst. I was only 14 years old at the time, and it was very disturbing to me because I felt something was very wrong, and yet I didn’t know what it was. I developed this tremendous distaste for situations where everything seems fine on the surface, and yet people are suffering underneath. And I associate that state with denial and unconsciousness.

**ST:** Did you find something similar when you went into business situations around the world?

**FK:** Yes. When I came to the United States and I began working with corporations here, I saw that, although the content was very different – because people don’t get murdered or tortured physically – the energy was not so different. After my experience in Argentina, I developed this very keen sense around the situations of denial and unconsciousness, and particularly I was shocked when I started to experience similar feelings in a business context, where people apparently were having a normal meeting – not particularly productive, but I wouldn’t say horrible – and yet I was feeling the same way I was feeling in Argentina. And then after interviewing the people out of the meeting or hearing them speak about what had happened, I realized that the meeting was a farce. But it was worse than that. It was that they knew it was a farce – everybody knew. So it was the same kind of craziness – not physical violence, but people were participating in a charade where everybody knew they were not telling the truth and that others were not telling the truth and they were not talking about the real issues. Everybody knew this but

nobody wanted to say that the emperor had no clothes.

And I realized that in the context of business, there was a great opportunity to create an environment where people could speak their truth and be heard and relate to each other respectfully, and effectively, and that's what I've been doing ever since, in large and small corporations all over the world.

**ST:** How do you go about trying to make people conscious?

**FK:** Well, I'm in a funny position because I straddle two worlds. My background is very technical. I studied mathematical economics at Berkeley, and then I got my Ph.D. and I went to teach in the business school at MIT. So it was a natural fit for me to go to business "undercover" – I presented myself, and I still do, as a consultant or a teacher who can help people in business be more effective and make more money. I feel very at peace and at ease in that world, because that's where I come from.

Now, the truth is that in order to make more money, I believe you have to face what's really going on, you have to share truthful information, and you have to bring the conflicts to the surface and deal with them creatively and respectfully. You don't have a choice. Your only other choice is not to be as effective or as profitable as you could be.

My private agenda was to suggest that in order to make money you have to serve other people – for me that's the beauty of conscious capitalism. The essence of business is to serve the customer and give the customer more value than the cost of your product – or more value than what they have to pay to acquire your product or service. So the key is not so much what you are doing, but how you are doing it.

**ST:** What would a conscious business environment look like?

**FK:** The most significant observation would be the total absence of abuse, shame, and threat. People would take responsibility for their behavior and deal with each other honestly and respectfully. They would hold themselves and each other accountable for adhering to some set of agreed-upon values and for working toward an agreed-upon vision. Deviations and errors would be an opportunity for learning and growth, rather than an excuse for blame and punishment.

There would still be problems, people that don't get along, and losses. A conscious business environment is not a Garden of Eden where everything is always blissful. The marketplace is a turbulent place with no guarantees of success. The main difference displayed by a conscious business environment is that in addition to the drive to achieve their goals, people would experience also the commitment to operate according to their values. This commitment is the source of unconditional dignity that would give the organization and its members a core of luminosity from which to extend into the world.

A conscious business environment would be a challenge, an invitation to develop people's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual spheres. The conscious organization is a crucible where people refine themselves through service and partnership. As Khalil Gibran would say, a conscious business is a place where it becomes obvious that work is "love made visible."