Released in 1995, *Tommy Boy* tells the story of Tommy Callahan (played by Chris Farley), who inherits controlling stake in a small auto parts business when his father, ‘Big Tom’ Callahan, suddenly passes away from what appears to be a heart attack. Richard Hayden (played by David Spade), former assistant to Big Tom and Tommy’s childhood friend, accompanies Tommy as he makes the annual sales trip around the country in an attempt to ease the concerns of Callahan Auto’s customers following the unexpected death of Tommy’s father. Much like Callahan’s customers, the bank is also very nervous that the business will not be able to repay their outstanding debts and demands immediate repayment through the sale of Callahan (a portion of the proceeds is to go to the bank to cover the debts). Just before dying, Big Tom had married Beverly, a con artist who inherits a considerable portion of the company from her late husband. She also advocates for an immediate sale of all holdings of Callahan Auto to rival Zalinsky Auto Parts so that she can convert all of her shares into cash. Owned by Ray Zalinsky (played by Dan Aykroyd), Zalinsky Auto Parts seeks only to own the Callahan name and eliminate a competitor in the auto parts market. Once purchased, Zalinsky intends to dissolve Callahan auto, a major company keeping the town of Sandusky, Ohio alive, and displace all of its workers.

**Portrayal of the Business World**

There are two companies that are represented in the movie. The first is Callahan Auto, a small town auto parts manufacturer located in Sandusky, Ohio. The movie eludes to the fact that this company, for the most part, keeps the town of Sandusky alive. It employs hundreds of workers and gives many people a decent living for themselves and their families. In one scene, Tommy is walking through the manufacturing floor and talking to the various workers on the job. The spirits are high, people are generally happy, and Big Tom is seen being openly friendly.
and supportive of his workforce. In the end of the movie, with the company saved and Tommy now in charge, the workers are all gathered around Tommy as he gives a speech ensuring them that they will always have good paying jobs and support from Callahan. The business world is painted to be very positive when it comes to small business. The man at the top knows everyone at the bottom (and even knows their families), and he takes a vested interest in not only running his business, but ensuring that his employees have happy and prosperous lives.

In contrast, there is another company, Zalinsky Auto Parts, who seeks to purchase Callahan Auto simply for the name and then dissolve the company, leaving all of Callahan Auto’s employees out of a job. The movie eludes to the Callahan Auto name carrying a reputation for high quality parts in the auto industry, whereas Zalinsky is lower quality for a cheaper price. Once in control of Callahan, Zalinsky intends to put his cheap parts into Callahan boxes and sell them at a premium, even though they are no higher quality than other comparable parts they already produce. Through these interactions, the large business world is portrayed as greedy, money-hungry, and generally uncaring towards people and communities. It is suggested that they are willing to do anything within their power to increase profits for the company.

**Business Ethical Dilemma 1: Dissolution of a Company without Regard for its Workforce**

When Tommy first encounters Ray Zalinsky at his factory in Chicago, he makes a desperate plea to the businessman to reconsider his plan to purchase Callahan and lay off the workers. Tommy argues that there is “a town at stake” and that closing the factory is going to put a lot of people out of work and affect an entire community. Ray counters Tommy’s argument with a purely financially driven argument. He says that it is “natural selection” in business for the smaller, weaker ones to die off and the stronger ones to survive. Ray then explains that it is not financially desirable for him to inherit another factory to keep open when “all [he] wants is
the goddamn box.” At the end of the encounter, Ray, seemingly unmoved, dismisses Tommy just before he intends to sign the papers to make the sale final. Tommy is escorted out of the building and barred from reentry.

The issue was resolved when Tommy reenters the building by force, wearing road flares that look like a suicide bomb vest to dissuade security from throwing him out. He enters the meeting room where Ray Zalinsky is about to sign the sale contracts, attracting a news agency along the way who video tapes the interaction live. Using Ray’s own slogan, “I make car parts for the American working man because that’s who I am and that’s who I care about,” Tommy convinces Ray to sign a sales agreement for Zalinsky Auto Parts to buy half of a million brake pads from Callahan Auto, thus helping a town of American workers under pressure from a live TV audience, all the while under the assumption that he is going to own the company outright very soon anyways.

After signing the sales agreement, it is then revealed that Beverly, Big Tom’s widow, is a con artist who was already married at the time of her wedding to Big Tom, and therefore, her marriage was void. As a result, the portion of shares in Callahan that she had inherited actually belong to Tommy, who has no intention of selling to Zalinsky. In the end, Ray honors the sales agreement and Tommy meets his sales quota solely through Zalinsky Auto Parts. The factory never closes, and no one loses their jobs. It is worth noting that the morally positive outcome was realized not because of a change of heart from big business, but because the morally responsible small business outwitted the big businessman, much to the dismay of big business.

Even though the end result came about in a highly unrealistic manner (I’m sure Tommy committed some sort of crime when he threatened a building full of people with a bomb), it is what I believe is right; the Callahan factory should not close because it is not right that so many
people (and an entire town) should be faced with such sudden hardship. More realistically, if Zalinsky had followed through with the purchase, the responsible thing to do would be to absorb Callahan’s operations under the Zalinsky umbrella, retaining Callahan’s workforce and investing in the startup of the new brake pad division. There would be issues with integration of workplace policies between the two organizations, but I believe that a nice increase in profits is still possible with the addition of Callahan operations to Zalinsky’s auto parts empire. It may not be as much profit as is possible by dissolving the company, but keeping all those people employed is more important than the money lost.

**Business Ethical Dilemma 2: Deception by Selling Zalinsky Products in a Callahan Box**

During Tommy’s first encounter with Ray, it is revealed that Ray intends to sell Zalinsky products inside of boxes with the Callahan name and logo on them. The movie eludes to the fact that Callahan parts have a reputation for being high quality parts that sell for a high price. What Zalinsky intends to do is put their cheaper parts into Callahan boxes and sell them at a premium based solely on the Callahan name. This is deception of the consumer. When a customer buys a Callahan part, they pay more money in expectation of a higher quality part. For Zalinsky to knowingly put cheaper parts into the marketplace under the guise of more expensive ones and sell for a premium price is unethical and should not be done.

The issue was resolved by the sale of Callahan never going through in the first place, so Zalinsky was never able to pursue his marketing scheme.

As before, if the sale had gone through and it were up to me, I would keep Callahan operations open and sell actual Callahan parts for a premium price, with the profits benefitting the Zalinsky group of auto parts.
Business Ethical Dilemma 3: Willful Destruction of Company Records

Beverly’s secret husband, Paul, is also desperate for the sale of Callahan Auto to go through as soon as possible so that he can profit along with his wife. When Tommy starts landing sales orders and making the possibility of no Callahan sale more likely, Paul takes matters into his own hands by going into Callahan’s computer system and destroying the records of the recent parts sales made. Roughly half of the customers cancel their orders out of frustration, and Callahan cannot turn over the product that they need to in order to stay afloat financially. Even though there are many ethical issues with this character (i.e. fraud through a fake marriage, destroying delivery equipment), I am choosing to focus only on the intentional alteration and destruction of computer records.

This issue is never really resolved in the movie. The customers that had placed orders with Callahan to stock their shelves with brake pads never saw their orders fulfilled. It is plausible that these stores had a shortage of brake pads to offer their customers due to the meddling of Paul. In the end, Paul was arrested for several types of fraud, one of them including “computer fraud,” referring to this specific misdeed.

It seems obvious that the ideal solution is such a deliberate criminal act never occur in the first place. Since it has, it seems only right that he should be arrested for it. Regarding the victims of the crime (Callahan and their customers), the best Callahan can do at that point is to call their prospective customers and explain what has happened. The best they can hope for is to reinstate those orders. The more likely outcome is that they can thaw relations with these customers and keep the door open with them for potential future business.
Other Business Ethics Issues

There are many other glaring business ethics issues throughout this movie, many of them coming in the form of fraud. Beverly and Paul deliberately fabricated a lie about their relationship (they posed as mother and son when they were actually married) and targeted the single Big Tom to marry him with the intention of “bleeding him dry in a divorce settlement.”

Another interesting issue is the notion of promoting family into management positions instead of other people that are obviously more qualified. Tommy Callahan took 7 years to graduate with his 4 year college degree, the capstone being his earning of a D+ in US History (*tsk* John Hancock… It’s Herbie Hancock). Then, much to the dismay of Richard, Tommy is given a new office with a window in it. Throughout much of the movie, Richard is forced to coach and mentor Tommy because Tommy is not nearly qualified enough to assume the role running the company. The right thing to do seems to promote Richard into the position instead while Tommy starts lower on the totem pole and works his way up as he becomes better at what he does.

Summary: What Was Learned From This Exercise

Overall, I learned that ethical issues in business are more prevalent than I first realized, even in popular media. This class has given me a greater awareness and understanding of ethical decisions that are made in business, and has also given me more viewpoints to consider and resources to use when making those decisions. I am comforted in the fact that most decisions that are considered right and ethical are standpoints that I would have taken in the first place, and now feel reassured in my decision making ability with company issues that are not strictly technical.
Regarding this exercise in particular, I have learned that such goofy movies as *Tommy Boy* are still fraught with serious real world issues. We can all laugh and learn at the same time!