

Chapter 32

Ethics for Students Means Knowing and Experiencing: Multiple Theories, Multiple Frameworks, Multiple Methods in Multiple Courses

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ABSTRACT

There is growing interest in ethics education and the literature is replete with methods for approaching this complex and challenging subject. This chapter reviews the state of ethics education in business programs from infusion across the curriculum to standalone courses, the potential impact it may have on ethical behavior, and outlines several approaches to addressing ethics in the classroom. An instructional module in ethical decision making, grounded in scholarly literature, is presented. The authors discuss implications for practice and suggest utilizing several approaches from multiple perspectives to facilitate the development of ethical thought and action.

INTRODUCTION

“Ethical problems are truly managerial dilemmas, because they represent a conflict between an organization’s economic performance (measured by revenues, costs, and profits) and its social performance (stated in terms of obligations to persons both within and outside the organization)” (Hosmer, 1991). The first, called the shareholder or stockholder interest, originally defined by Fried-

man (1970), is a top priority in business and to some the only priority (Ferguson, et. al., 2011). It is profit maximization. The second, identified by Freeman (1994), includes stakeholders: employees, customers, and suppliers, as well society in general (Murphy, 2011).

Business globalization and recent economic recessions have sent business managers scrambling to maintain economic performance in terms of the stockholder interest. At same time, business

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scandals from Enron and WorldCom to Martha Stewart focused the media spotlight on business schools, demanding that graduates be sent to the workplace with knowledge of and sensitivity for the impact their business decisions have on their stakeholders and a more socially oriented approach to managing ethically.

Indeed, Business schools have increasingly come under fire to help play a more active role in shaping the leaders of the future (Fletcher-Brown et al, 2012). In light of the current environment, it is imperative for educators to incorporate ethical decision-making into their curricula in an effort to help equip future leaders with tools or strategies that can be used to navigate murky areas (Swanson & Fisher, 2008). In addition, the need for ethics instruction has also been supported by external accrediting agencies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). Further work by a global initiative consisting of all academic stakeholders of the UN Global Compact (2008) resulted in the Principles of Responsible Management Education.

The extent to which ethics instruction can change moral standards, however, has been debated. Several educators suggest teaching an ethical system of analysis to raise self-awareness rather than teaching, or trying to teach, moral standards which may perhaps change over the course of one's development or vary based on cultural background (Oddo, 1997; McDonald, 2004; Ritter, 2006; Awasthi, 2008; Cagle, Glasgo, & Holmes, 2008). From the multiplicity of published articles about how to teach ethics and in the opinions of many scholars, there clearly is a need for business ethics instruction.

Following a review of the extent literature, Lau (2010) concluded that business ethics instruction did appear to be worthwhile but that design and methodology varied widely between studies. His

own study of undergraduates concluded that ethics education was able to enhance students' ethical awareness and moral reasoning. However, in other studies, he noted that no change was found (Ritter, 2006).

This chapter summarizes the literature about ethics instruction, describes ethics instruction modules grounded in the research, and offers several keys to effectively teaching ethics in the business classroom. The instructional method focuses on teaching a system for ethical analysis and awareness development rather than imposing one set of moral standards in an effort to allow for contextual difference, nuance and complexity. A single definition of "ethical leader" is elusive; it varies based on many factors such as culture, religion, location, age, and situation. Using a multidimensional approach to study ethical decision making allows students to investigate alternatives, find common ground, or at least, gain clarity around their own notions of ethical leadership. The next sections of the chapter will discuss when, what, and how to teach ethics. When one considers the first issue, when to teach ethics, three major placements in the curriculum will be discussed: stand-alone single ethics course, ethics units of study integrated into several courses throughout students' years of study, and a combination of these two. Next, concerning what to teach, four ethical frameworks that may form the content of basic ethics instruction will be explained. Finally, suggestions for how to teach ethics by incorporating learning activities that allow students to practice with the content of each framework and then engage in reflection are outlined. These activities include studying scenarios and cases related both to students' personal lives and to business situations related to their coursework. Including student-experience situations adds relevance and helps students to bridge the ethical reasoning gap between their present world and the future workplace.

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