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The Only Solution to the Decline in Business Ethics: Ethical Managers

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Abstract

This paper defines business ethics as a series of behaviors that adhere to values held by the individual manager, the manager's supervisors and subordinates, general society and, most importantly, the manager's customers and clients. The concept of business ethics is explored through several levels of business organizations and operating environments.

The paper then examines recent evidence of the decline in business ethics by noting a few examples involving Beech-Nut, Hertz, Michael Milken, E.F. Hutton, Sears, Salomon Brothers, Dalkon Shield, Exxon Valdez, S&L scandal, brokerage analysts. Surveys are cited to indicate that the American public believes that business ethics are declining.

To further analyze the topic, the author reports on a series of structured interviews with managers in a variety of organizations. Fourteen senior managers were interviewed: 4 from large county government, 3 from state government, 4 from large corporations, 3 from small businesses. The managers were asked their opinions concerning the decline of business ethics, and for their recommendations to possibly retard the decline. All managers said they believed that ethics are in decline and that the public believes ethics are declining.

The recommendations for retarding or reversing the decline yielded several suggestions: teach ethics in schools and business organizations, develop and enforce Codes of Ethical Conduct within all organizations, establish better monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and hire ethical managers.

The paper builds on the interview results by coupling the managers' remarks with admonitions from many authors: while teaching ethics and Codes of Ethical Conduct are important, the most important factor is the ethical behavior of managers (leaders). Ethical leadership is fundamental since ethical behavior is an individual - not a corporate - matter. In practice, ethics is not something that a manager "does"; it is something that the manager "is".

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Definition of Business Ethics

Ethics is a value system by which individuals evaluate and judge the behaviors of themselves and others. Behavior is evaluated against some previously established set of standards. The traditional sources of ethical standards are religious, philosophical or cultural/societal value systems. Hurley (1972) describes ethics as “a process by which individuals, social groups, and societies evaluate their actions from a perspective of moral principles and values. This evaluation may be on the basis of traditional convictions, of ideals sought, of goals desired, of moral laws to be obeyed, of an improved quality of relations among humans and with the environment. When we speak of ‘ethics’ and ethical reflection, we mean the activity of applying these various yardsticks to the actions of persons and groups.”

Ethics for business managers involves a series of behaviors that adhere to the values held by the individual manager, the manager’s supervisors and subordinates, the general society and, most importantly, the managers’ customers/clients (Bartlett, 1994).

Steiner (2000) describes four levels of business ethics on which the manager is evaluated:

1. The business system, with judgements made concerning the total effect of (capitalist) business on society;
2. The industry, with separate industries having varying ethical standards: e.g., a pharmaceutical firm vs. a movie studio;
3. The company, with individual firms having a wide variety of behavior patterns: e.g., Ben and Jerry’s vs. Dryers ice cream companies;

4. The individual manager, with each person responsible for their own behavior.

Regardless of their source, ethical standards and expectations exist for all firms and managers. Managers and companies are expected to act in an ethical manner (Gilmore, 1986). A major difficulty for managers, assuming that they choose to act ethically, is determining current or expected ethical standards. This can be especially difficult for multinational managers facing a variety of ethical expectations from diverse foreign cultures. Often, ethical standards are not explicitly expressed, yet managers are still held accountable to the “assumed or understood” standards.

The complexity of modern society and business increases the difficulty of determining the ethical context of managers’ actions. There is little problem identifying certain actions as unethical: embezzling a trust fund; using an employer’s assets for a personal business; practicing overt racial discrimination.

However, other business actions may be more difficult to characterize in terms of ethics: Is denying a woman, in her child-bearing years, the right to work in a plant containing toxic chemicals an unethical act of sex discrimination? Or, would allowing her to work there be an unethical act of ignoring her industrial-related health? Recent Supreme Court rulings do not answer this ethical question; they merely set legal precedents for litigation.

Clearly identified illegal actions can be viewed as ethical. American history has many examples: the “Underground Railroad” helping escaping slaves violated many state laws; the nonviolent

civil rights and anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s violated many state laws; the publishing of the Pentagon Papers violated several USA national security regulations. In business, paying “sales commissions” to an official of a foreign customer nation violates the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, but could be viewed by American workers as the ethical act of facilitating sales to protect their jobs. Perhaps, not paying the commission could be viewed as a manager’s ethical failure – neglecting their duty to their worker stakeholders.

Drucker (1974) quotes Hippocrates when presenting the minimal standard of ethical behavior for all managers in all business circumstances: *Primum Non Nocere* – “Above all, not knowingly do harm.” Adding to such general statements, many authors have developed lists of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for managers (Dalton, 1982). Goodpaster (1983) presents a list for managers that he calls “moral common sense: avoid harming others, respect the rights of others, do not lie or cheat, keep promises and contracts, obey the law, prevent harm to others, help those in need, be fair, and reinforce these imperatives in others.”

Declining Business Ethics

Even without a single agreed-upon definition of ethics, observations can be made concerning business’ adherence to generally accepted ethical principles.

Unfortunately, there are many examples of violations of current ethical standards by USA businesses: the substitution of adulterated concentrates in Beech-Nut baby juices (Anonymous, 1989); the withholding of information concerning the potential lethal nature of the Dalkon Shield intrauterine device (Mintz, 1985); the felony murder conviction of managers of Film Recovery

Systems of Chicago when they exposed their workers to cyanide poison and deliberately covered up warning label highlighting the danger (Anonymous, 1987).

Other examples of ethical violations include the behavior of the convicted bond broker Michael Milken (Rowe, 1990); the misuses of the banking system (check kiting) by E.F. Hutton (Moskowitz, 1985); the massive Saving and Loan scandal; the forging of customer signatures by Salomon Brothers in a scheme to dominate one day's purchase of US Treasury notes (Galen, 1991); Sears auto repair shops charging customers for new batteries, but installing used products; the continual marketing of deadly tobacco products to children; securities analysts' clear conflicts-of-interest in promoting stocks that the analysts personally own or that their firms represent in investment banking transactions (Morgenson 2001; Tully, 2001); and, Mitsubishi Motors covering up defects affecting thousands of cars (Anonymous, 2001).

Of course, there are many examples of ethical failures not involving business organizations: the Salt Lake City Olympic Organizing Committee bribing members of the International Olympic Selection Committee; President Clinton's questionable practices and statements; the admission of lying and fabrications in his classroom by Pulitzer Prize winning historian Joseph J. Ellis (Gorn, 2001).

A variety of research indicates that the American public perceives business ethics are in decline. Clymber (1985) found that 55% of the American public thought that corporate executives were dishonest. Jackson (1987) found that 49% of Americans thought that "white collar" crime is

common in business. Sandroff (1990) reported survey results in which over 50% of the respondents believed that business ethics declined in the 1980-1990 decade.

Michael Josephson studies social, business and political ethics. He writes that all persons in all fields have the potential for moral or immoral behavior (Wood, 1990). Josephson is very concerned with the decline of ethical behavior in younger Americans. In one article, he identifies the “I-deserve-its” or “IDIs” and notes that this group of young people demonstrate a “willingness to abandon traditional ethical restraints in the pursuit of success, comfort or personal goals” (Josephson, 1990).

To further explore these attitudes, structured interviews were conducted with fourteen managers in a variety of organizations. The interviews were conducted between November 2000 and April 2001. The interviewees were senior managers in their organizations: Four work in a very large county government that engages many business contractors on a regular basis. Most contracting involves elaborate Request-for-Proposals (RFP) and “objective” bidding processes. Three managers work for a very large state government that also uses many contractors. Four managers work for large US-based corporations. The final three managers own and operate small private businesses. All fourteen managers have been employed in their organization for over 10 years.

The fourteen separate interviews were held in each subject’s office. A series of open-ended questions addressed two areas: their opinions concerning the decline of business ethics and their advice for retarding the decline. To summarize the interview findings:

First, all managers stated that - in general - business ethics have been “getting worse” in the last few years. Several linked the decline in business ethics to a decline in societal ethics. Most mentioned “President Clinton’s ethical problems” as an example of declining societal ethics. Several also discussed the ongoing tobacco litigation and continual industrial pollution as examples of unethical corporate behavior.

Second, each manager described a personal experience in the past few years with an unethical action by a customer, contractor, superior or peer. Third, all managers noted that they hear continual complaints from the public and their customers about unethical business behavior.

Fourth, all managers offered a variety of suggestions to retard the decline in ethics, including: teach ethics in schools, develop Codes of Ethical Conduct, establish better monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and hire “more honest people.” Fifth, almost all managers were pessimistic concerning business ethics, indicating that they thought the decline would continue.

Effects of Declining Business Ethics

Assuming a decline in business ethics or, at a minimum, a perception of a decline, what is the significance? Does it really matter if more business people are committing unethical acts (or at least getting caught more often)? Yes! It is significant for two reasons:

First, the decline in ethics is *bad-for-business* and reflects an erosion of the principles needed for an ordered and functional modern technical society. The USA economic system is built on a series of values: trust, honesty, keeping commitments (contracts), respect for others’ property,

cooperation. Of course, there have always been examples of gross abuses, exploitation and misconduct. But as Bowie (1997) notes, a minimum “market place morality” is a requirement for business success. An efficient market needs standards of behavior based on some level of truth and trust.

An article by the former Chairman of IBM, John Akers (1989), closely links American competitiveness and ethics: “No society will compete very successfully with people stabbing each other in the back; with people trying to steal from each other...; it is a recipe for a nation to become wasteful, inefficient and non-competitive...; the greater the measure of mutual trust and confidence in the ethics of society, the greater its economic strength.” Silk (1989a) agrees that unethical behavior “will create a world of dog-eat-dog in which everyone ultimately loses...ethical principles constitute one of the strongest forces for keeping a society healthy and growing.”

Second, the decline of business ethics is *bad-business*. Its stakeholders are important evaluators of business’ ethical behavior: the individual managers, peer managers, workers, general society, government and – most importantly – the customers/clients.

In this arena, perception is extremely important (Morgan, 1993). Based on their perceptions, the stakeholders judge business as either ethical or unethical. Modern media, especially the proliferation of “news” sources, relentlessly shape the public’s perceptions of ethical behavior. Multiple TV channels devoted to business (e.g., Bloomberg, CNBC, FNN and MSNBC) run 24 hours per day. The Internet provides a constant source for general news and business news.

Internet “chat rooms” facilitate a wide exchange of data, much of it false, about all aspects of business behavior and alleged misbehavior (Anonymous, 2001).

While these perceptions and subjective standards may make managers uncomfortable, they are a fact-of-life for all organizations today (Prystay, 2001). For example, the makers of Sudafed were not judged as “responsive and concerned about the public’s welfare” as the maker of Tylenol were, when both responded to the use of their products by a random murderer (Horovitz, 1991). Another example: if the public perceives a firm as a polluter, even though the firm regularly invests in pollution control equipment, then the firm must adjust its actions or the portrayal of its actions accordingly (Hosmer, 1991).

Although all organizations, including business, must satisfy its customer/clients’ needs, it can be dangerous to base ethical standards solely on the latest opinion poll. At some level, ethics cannot be totally relative – even for business organizations. There must be a set of guiding ethical principles to “prevent a person from pulling the lever at Auschwitz” because the act was deemed ethical by a Nazi-dominated society (Goddard, 1998).

Recently, firms abandoned their fiduciary standards by permitting almost anyone to be “day traders” – a practice that led to financial ruin for many clients. The 1990s bull market, especially the late 1990s “dot.com mania”, created an environment in which clients demanded ever-higher investment returns. These unrealistic client demands in turn led firms to ignore well-known historical investment standards. By following their clients’ wishes, the firms violated their fiduciary obligation to reasonably protect their clients’ financial assets.

Retarding the Decline of Business Ethics

As noted earlier, the managers I interviewed made four suggestions on how to retard the decline in ethics: 1) teach ethics in schools, 2) develop Codes of Ethical Conduct, 3) establish better monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and, 4) hire “more honest people.” Many authors have offered similar recommendations.

Teach ethics in school: There is little debate over the need to teach values and ethical principles to young persons. Thompson (1989) describes a program in North Kansas City in which high school students are taught basic values “that form the basis for decision-making...honesty, generosity, helpfulness, self-reliance and kindness.” Thorn (1988) discusses research findings on the intellectual development of children, noting that “ethics have to be taught.”

There is disagreement over the usefulness of trying to teach ethics to university students, especially to graduate students in business schools. An obvious proponent of teaching ethics to graduate business students is John S. Shad, the former SEC Chairman, who donated \$30 million to the Harvard Business School to foster the exploration of ethical issues (Byrne, 1987).

While agreeing that teaching ethics may be useful, Akers (1989) cautions not to expect dramatic changes in students’ behavior: “If an MBA candidate doesn’t know the difference between honesty and crime, between lying and telling the truth, then business school...will not produce a born-again ethical convert.”

Bunke (1988) also questions the efficacy of teaching ethics in business schools. He recommends that society emphasize the inculcation of personal values through the family, pre-collegiate schools and religious institutions: “Maybe teach one small course...in the MBA curriculum...to remind out technically trained and frighteningly ambitious students that our business system will endure only so long as it is solidly rooted in meaningful idealism.”

The interviewees recommended that schools on all levels, especially undergraduate and graduate business schools, teach ethics. Several mentioned that, while schools may not change an adult student’s ethics, to ignore ethics in the curriculum would be a negative signal to the students and to society. This seems to be a consensus view in society and in academia: all accrediting bodies obligate business schools to offer required courses in ethics.

Develop Codes of Ethical Conduct: The interviewees proposed written Codes of Ethical Conduct for business organizations. Several emphasized the need for written codes in large organizations as a method of disseminating the ethical standards to a dispersed workforce. Since an organization may have thousands or hundreds of thousands of workers, all need a written statement of the firm’s ethical standards. These written codes promote and mold approved behaviors within the organization.

In fact, most large American companies have a written Code of Ethical Conduct, often widely distributed and publicized (Fisher *et al*, 2001). The Ethical Resource Center in Washington, DC estimated that 92% of the 2,000 largest American firms have a written Code of Ethics and about

33% have programs to educate their employees concerning the firms' view of ethical behavior (Anonymous, 1990).

Unfortunately, having a written Code of Ethical Conduct may not mean that firms are acting ethically. A survey of 350 firms determined that those with a written Code of Ethical Conduct were "more often charged with wrongdoing than those without such policies" (Barrett, 1988). For example, despite having all employees sign a Code of Ethical Conduct, Hertz publicly admitted to overcharging its customers \$13 million during a two-year period. Some authors have suggested that a written Code of Ethical Conduct provide employees with a "psychological cover" for unethical behavior. The employees know the firm has a Code and, therefore, their actions must be OK or ethical (Somers, 2001).

But Adams *et al* (2001) reported that their study found "the mere presence of a code of ethics appears to have a positive impact of perceptions of ethical behavior in organizations, even when respondents cannot recall specific contents of the code."

Establish better monitoring and control mechanisms: Several interviewees stated that organizations needed more effective systems to monitor behaviors related to ethical decision-making. Somers (2001) agrees that Codes are not enough. Firms must have processes in place to report unethical behaviors. The existence of Codes of Ethical Conduct is helpful, but the organization must make the practice of ethics an integral part of its daily activities. Most important activities of organizations are monitored, reported on, and analyzed. The practice of ethics should be treated like other important corporate activities (Fisher, 2001).

Hire more honest people: The interviewees stressed that the most important element of an “ethical organization” is the individual. The key to ethical performance is hiring and promoting ethical people. The most important “ethical people” in the organization are those at the top – the leaders.

Thousands of articles and books discuss effective leaders, their characteristics, their selection, their techniques, their practices and their relationship to their followers. This continuing focus on leaders is warranted because everyone plays “follow-the-leader”.

In business, managers are usually considered equivalent to leaders, though some authors reject a strict equivalency (Zaleznik, 1986). There are many examples of persons without management titles who are effective leaders – based on their ability, assumed authority, personality and accomplishments. The ball players, Babe Ruth, Johnny Unitas, Magic Johnson are examples of team leaders who exerted powerful influence on their teams (or co-workers) through charisma and ability, without being the official manager or coach (Hitt, 1989).

While leaders are important in performing most functions (strategic and tactical planning, staffing, finance, marketing, etc.), they are essential in organizational adherence to ethical principles (Bloskie, 1995). The difficulty in defining an organization’s ethics often results in the leader becoming the embodiment of the organization’s ethical principles (Dukerich *et al*, 1990). The person at the top is continually observed for ethical signals. William F. May, the former CEO of American Can Company, said that “the CEO has a unique responsibility: He’s the role

model. What he does, how he lives, and the principles under which he operates become...those of the rest of the corporation” (Anonymous, 1988).

There are a variety of techniques and suggestions to assist the leader in promoting ethical behavior. Goddard (1988) recommends several processes: “Identify ethical attitudes critical to your specific operation, select employees with the desired ethical attitudes, establish a work culture that reinforces the ethical attitudes and increases employee participation in (ethical) decision making, and exhibit ethical leadership.”

Of the many techniques available to leaders for encouraging and monitoring ethical behavior, none is as important or as powerful as the behavior of the leader (Butcher, 1997a). The most effective proven communication tool is the attitude and behavior of the leader (McCaskey, 1979). Andrews (1989) stresses the direct link between the leader and the organization’s ethics: “The stubborn persistence of ethical problems obscures the simplicity of the solution – once the leaders of a company decide to do something *about their ethical standards*. Ethical dereliction, sleaziness or inertia are not merely an individual’s failure, but a management problem as well.”

Since leaders are very closely observed by their subordinates, leaders cannot merely espouse ethics, they must be ethical. Many studies have demonstrated that workers follow their managers: not what managers say or publish, but what managers do (Schriesheim, 1980).

Organizations adopt and follow the ethics, style, and methods of their leader. Workers quickly identify inconsistencies; and are even quicker to identify phonies or hypocrites. Duke de la

Rouchefoucauld once cynically observed that “Hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue” (Silk, 1989b); and workers quickly spot hypocrisy.

The leader’s importance translates into close scrutiny of their most subtle behavior. The leader’s position “amplifies his/her most causal judgement, jokes, and silences” (Andrews, 1989). Bird (1989) writes of the “moral muteness of managers” who choose not to exercise their responsibility in relation to ethical issues. If top managers, through their daily behavior and comments, indicate that ethics are personally important to them, the workers will act accordingly (Marinko, 1987).

Conclusion

While a single definition of American business ethics does not exist, American society (and this paper’s interviewees) expects business to act ethically. This is especially true of large American firms. Of the many ways to foster ethics within an organization, the most important is the ethical leadership of managers (Groner, 1996). A major difficulty occurs when the manager/leader is not ethical. Education, Codes of Ethical Conduct and monitoring are probably not complete solutions. Dechant (1990) writes that it is not possible to train or educate leaders to be ethical if they are not already ethical (before they join an organization).

Ironically, “organization or corporate” ethics are not a collective matter, but rather an individual responsibility (Nixon, 1993). The personal ethical standards of the manager/leader set the collective standards for the organization (Butcher, 1997b).

Ethics is not something that a manager “does”; it is something that the manager “is”. The late Thornton Bradshaw, former CEO of RCA and former President of ARCO, recommended that leaders should “merge your own set of ethics and values into what you do during the day. If you have to draw a curtain down when you go to work in the morning, and spend eight hours...doing something that you don’t believe in, then you’re in trouble” (Goddard, 1998).

If business ethics are in decline, the only solution is increased ethical leadership from the top.

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