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Ethics Education or Ethics Training: What is in a Name?
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Abstract

"Ethics training" is seen as the way to improve the ethical perspectives and decision making of individuals in organizations. Yet, the concept of ethics is so diverse that we contend one cannot be trained in it, for training assumes a correct way of doing something. Once trained, one knows how to do the "said" task. The concept of training is an over-simplistic approach to a complex set of issues and decision criteria that confront individuals needing to make an ethical decision. This paper contends that ethics education in the workplace is a better alternative to ethics training. Having a mindset that is focused upon ethics education leads one to conceive of the problem with a more intellectually advanced rigor than that of training. Education recognizes the complexity of the issue at hand, whilst training may devalue the experience to one of the learning of prescriptive rules.

Key Words: ethics education, ethics training

Introduction

Ethics 'training' programs have been cited as a means of institutionalizing ethics within the organization by a wide range of writers, (McDonald and Zeppl 1989; Laczniak and Murphy 1991; Sims 1992; Thorne LeClair and Ferrell 2000). At one end of the spectrum Harrington (1991) suggests that organizations should orient ethics training toward 'strategic issues' whilst other writers such as Laczniak and Murphy (1991) suggest that these training programs should only comprise one seminar to be attended every several years. A seminar attended every several years implies that ethics training is simple and one assumes readily absorbed and retained. This rationale is surely far from the truth. The inculcation of ethics in an organization is not an osmotic process. It is a complex situation that requires constant attention.

As Weber and Gillespie (1998) contend, one of the difficulties in teaching ethics in organizations is being able to determine, measure or even predict actual behavior in real ethical decision situations. The aim of any ethics course is the ability to affect in positive ways real behavior in real organizations in real situations. This is not a simple process for which one can train. It is a process that requires something more complex than just training. One must adopt an education focus.

This paper contends that sharing the company's ethics with the staff is not a simple nor a speedy task, nor one that can be administered infrequently. The complexity of the interaction between individuals within organizations and between individuals representing other organizations is not to be underestimated. It must be remembered that employees come to organizations with well-established ethical value systems that have been nurtured in them since their first human interactions. They must be allowed and encouraged to build upon their own value systems, through an on-going interactive, intellectually rigorous education process and not a prescriptive training process.

Ethical Decision Making Models

In the last twenty years, a number of writers have attempted to encapsulate the ethical decision making process in a model. Three of these models are those by Trevino (1986), Hunt and Vitell (1986) and Strong and Meyer (1992).

Trevino: A Person-Situation Interactionist Model

The title of Trevino's model implies that when individuals are making ethical decisions there is a definite interaction between the individual and the situation in which the person finds oneself. The model is based upon three factors. These areas are cognitive moral development, individual moderators and situational moderators. The stage of cognitive moral development of the individual interacts with the other factors in the model to produce decisions which lead one to act either ethically or unethically in any given situation, depending upon the nature of the ethical dilemma.
Trevino (1986) contends that the situational moderators can change one’s stage of cognitive moral development. Trevino believes that this can be done by placing individuals in the position where either the organization’s culture, the immediate job context or the characteristics of the work can lead the individual to face ethical dilemmas that will challenge the individual’s current stage of cognitive moral development. The need to face these ethical dilemmas will mean that these moderators will have a positive impact on the individual’s stage of cognitive moral development.

Hunt and Vitell: General Theory of Marketing Ethics

The Hunt and Vitell (1986 p.5) model was established in an attempt to explain the decision making process for problem situations having ethical content. Hunt and Vitell (1986) used various studies by others to build up evidence to support their contention of the importance of the role of the organization in influencing the ethics of employees.

The Hunt and Vitell (1986) approach has been labeled as the ‘rational man’ approach by Laczniak and Murphy (1991). Their approach is based upon the belief that an individual will focus upon any given ethical problem from the perspective of calculating the dimensions of the problem and working through ‘a set of decision protocols’ that will maximize the outcomes available to the individual. One then decides upon the appropriate option by examining the relative merits of each course of action and evaluating them. Finally, one makes a decision based on one’s judgement of the situation that is being faced. However, that decision and the proposed ensuing course of action, that the individual had planned to take, may be impacted upon by situational constraints that may exist at the time.

Strong and Meyer: An Integrative Descriptive Model of Ethical Decision Making

Strong and Meyer have developed a model in which they have attempted to align managerial decision making with the effect that it has upon corporate conduct. Strong and Meyer (1992) suggested that managerial behaviour and decision making would have an impact upon the manager’s conduct of business from the perspective of social responsibility in the areas of: legal responsibility, ethical responsibility, economic responsibility and discretionary responsibility.

According to Strong and Meyer (1992), the benefit of their measure is that it forces individuals to make a choice between conflicting options. This choice approximates the real world of managerial decision making where managers must look at alternative ways of solving dilemmas. In many cases, a manager will be confronted by the necessity to decide trade-offs between alternatives. The perfect solution is rarely found and so a compromise situation must be considered and actioned.

Overview of the Models

All of the models examine the ways in which individuals attempt to make ethical decisions. They all recognize that the process is a synthesis of individual and situational factors that combine in different ways to produce decisions. Each individual comes to any decision situation as a unique being. The person can not separate themselves from the past, the present, or the future in terms of the impact of the decision that may be made. Each individual perceives the issue, the constraining features of the external environment and the organizational forces that are involved from a unique perspective. Each person then makes a decision. The individual then feels the impact of that decision which may either reinforce the decision made, or may lead, in future situations, to a modification of the original behavior. The three models demonstrate that the circumstances in which one makes an ethical decision are complex. Therefore the complexity of trying to communicate the ethical ethos of the organization cannot be done just by training. The process requires a higher level of understanding that we suggest can only be attained through the use of ongoing education.

Is Training the same as Education?

According to Bryans and Smith (2000 p.228), the purpose of training is “relatively narrow and well-defined being typically short term with outcomes that can be specified in a degree of detail, probably as competencies or skills.”. Training typically teaches people to do specific tasks. Often it is narrow in its focus and does not necessarily influence behavior. Training implies that there are ‘answers’ to problems which present themselves. In providing answers or solutions to situations, training does not acknowledge the existence or variability of outside factors that may impact on the situation. The term ‘training’ comes from the Latin word trahere,
meaning 'to drag or to draw'. Education comes from the Latin docere, which means 'to lead'. Qubein (1996) sees training as organizations dragging their employees towards their goals rather than leading them. Education, on the other hand, is broader than training, in that it is about developing the individual in terms of one's personal characteristics: it takes the process to a deeper level of awareness and understanding of the topic under consideration.

Whilst one could adopt the view that training is a part of the education process it could lead one to overlook the essential differences between the two approaches. Training teaches people what to do; it deals with actions; it teaches how to do something. It is prescriptive in nature and as such is anchored in the past. It teaches people to perform repetitive actions and in an environment as volatile and dynamic as today, employees need to have an orientation that is comfortable with constant learning or change. When circumstances change, old ways of doing things have to be 'unlearned' and a whole new set of protocols learned. Training becomes dead-end when skills become obsolete. In addition, by using the term 'training' one could place in the minds of the individuals involved a belief that:

a) ethics is a prescriptive set of tasks that can be readily learnt,
b) everyone should be able to be trained in how to be ethical in all situations.

This, however, is far from the truth as ethical behavior is not a skill, nor an action that can be learnt. Ethical behavior is much more complex than the attributes that can be contained in a training program. As such, senior managers may disguise the complexity of the task of ethics education. This may result in the subsequent minimization of corporate funding that could lead to a minimalist approach to the issue.

Education on the other hand, is the process of moving an individual from one state of consciousness to a higher level of understanding. This is a process which cannot be prescriptive but must be interactive. Education allows one to build on all ready developed skills whereas training just adds more skills. While training is prescriptive, education teaches people to make choices. Training might give people competence, however it is not competence alone that is the hallmark of successful employees. People who can demonstrate inner qualities and the ability to adapt rather than just expound external skills are more successful (Qubein 1996).

In the 1980s when Mezirow (1985) and Marxick (1988) were writing, most workplaces were taking a behaviorist approach to training. Since 1990 there has, however, been a new paradigm emerging in terms of workplace learning. This new paradigm has been loosely termed 'the learning organization' (Senge 1990). This newer organization has broadened the focus of learning away from the purely instrumental approach. An integration of both personal and job-related development is now emerging and there is a need to recognize the value of the individual and the group in terms of decision making in the organization. All of this change and development is taking place in an environment that encourages individuals and groups to reflect on their day to day activities. This 'reflectivity' is done in both formal and informal situations and in doing so decisions are reviewed in the light of outcomes and problems that may be reconceptualized as the factors change. In this enlightened environment to which many organizations are now aspiring, the approach that we are suggesting of educating people in morals seems imminently suitable. If individuals are to be encouraged to make one's own sense of reality through decision making then how are such decisions made in ethical situations? For such an understanding is critical to our perspective that acquiring knowledge in ethics is one of education rather than training.

Organizations need to recognize that they are unable to 'train' individuals in ethical decision making. The best that one can hope for is to arm one's employees with a range of skills that enables each person to establish an ethical reality for himself or herself in any given situation. Such education should be “…not about rules, but about how to make value-based decisions.” (Newman 1997, p.26).

Maclagan (1994, p.4) sums it up well when he says that ethics programs should not be aimed at a 'moral conversion process', but rather they should be about developing the process of ethical analysis. He goes on to say that the aims of any ethics program can be identified as:

- "Raising awareness and stimulating the moral imagination. People must recognize an ethical issue before they can act on it."
- To provide concepts, theories and analytical skills which will enable individuals to engage in moral reasoning and decision making.
- To help managers create organizations which encourage and support ethical conduct at the personal level and at the organization level help prevent undesirable outcomes..."
Penn and Collier (1985) cited in Penn (1990, p124) capture the essence of the idea when they say that, “The capacity for principled moral reasoning, like the capacity for mathematical and scientific reasoning, can and must be developed by means of focused, systematic and long-term educational effort.” Hopefully, the education provided will assist individuals to decide for themselves the best course of action to take when confronted with an ethical dilemma. The best outcome, for which the senior management of an organization can hope, is that the decision made has an ethical congruence with the values of the organization.

Education will produce this ability to adapt, whilst training will only produce an ability to replicate known situations. As ethical dilemma vary from situation to situation and the individual perspective of employees also will differ, one must rely on the adaptive ability of education-based solutions rather than those narrowly defined in training. Education broadens the mind to deal with the unfamiliar and thus it should be relied upon when facilitating ethical discussions within organizations.

Conclusion

Ethical decision making is not a simple skill for which one can train. It is a complex process that requires education that is initiated and conducted by experienced facilitators, who understand the intricacies of what is required in educational situations.

Unlike Taylor, who believed that there was ‘one best way’, and that people could be trained in that ‘one best way’, adult moral learning is more complex as it involves a myriad of factors that impact on the decision to be made. The individual’s moral values, the organizational culture and society’s expectations, all meld into one. Acknowledging this point, from an organizational perspective, is a more accurate representation of the realities confronting employees with regard to ethical decision making.

An ethics education focus also puts companies on notice that they must continually develop their people and not assume that they have been ‘trained’ to be ethical and therefore do not need further development. To see ethical development as an issue of training assumes that it is a finite experience and that everyone knows what to do in every situation. A mind-set that views ethical development from an educational point of view leads to the recognition that it must be an ongoing process and must be continually evolving to meet the changing needs of the society and the marketplace.

References


