Chapter 21

Nurturing Integrity in Management Education with the Development of an Alternative Web of Metaphors

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ABSTRACT

In recent years management education has sought to integrate into both undergraduate and graduate programs a concern for ethics and integrity. If this goal is to be achieved management educators must address the way in which an overreliance on mainstream metaphors (e.g., business-as-war) perpetuates an approach to management which is at odds with ethics and integrity. They need to be mindful of how metaphors are used and the images that they evoke. Part of the challenge in fostering ethics and integrity is to challenge the preconceptions which students have about the nature of business activities. Such attitudes are generally in line with these mainstream metaphors. In this chapter, the authors' goal is not to find the perfect metaphor; one which will best incorporate a praxis of integrity as a part of management education. Rather they suggest that overuse of any metaphor has distorting effects and that what is the needed is to develop a web of metaphors which will provide management students with a capacity for seeing events from a broader perspective which includes considerations of ethical and value implications. Exposure to different metaphors will lead to different lines of reasoning and decision-making. By using different metaphors to understand the complex and paradoxical character of management, students have the opportunity to see possibilities for action and implications of decisions that they may not have thought about otherwise. In short, it is their claim that management education needs metaphorical pluralism if it is to nurture ethics and integrity.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Enron, WorldCom and other scandals of the first few years of this century it has become axiomatic to say that ethics needs to be part of the business school program (AACSB, 2004). The financial collapse of 2007-2008 was in large part attributable to a failure of morality on the part of countless graduates of business schools who provided mortgage loans to unqualified applicants and sold those loans in bundles without disclosing the level of risk involved (Lewis, 2010, Holland, 2009, Treviño & Nelson, 2011). The use of mathematical models to the exclusion of other ways of framing their activities allowed countless participants in the financial markets to completely ignore the ethical implications of what they were doing. Given the expressed concern with a lack of ethics, it is puzzling to read comments in the business press such as this; "How did integrity become the key characteristic of leaders?" and in particular business leaders (Weinberger, 2010). The author quotes Jack Welch, the legendary former CEO of General Electric, as saying he never held a management meeting where integrity was not mentioned. Great leaders of the past, Weinberger (2010) notes, would more likely be cited for courage, wisdom and steadfast resolve – think of Churchill, Roosevelt and Gandhi – but leaders today, at least in business do not claim those values, they claim integrity.

Our puzzlement arises because integrity, which is cited so often as a quality of a leader, is a term that speaks of moral rectitude. The Oxford English Dictionary defines integrity as; "Unimpaired moral state; freedom from moral corruption; innocence, sinlessness," and further as "Soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue, esp. in relation to truth and fair dealing; uprightness, honesty, sincerity" (OED, 2011). If integrity is the commonest trait in leaders, and integrity means that those leaders are morally sound, how is it that unethical behavior occurs with such frequency in business organizations?

While not all the blame for the ethical failings of business practitioners can be attributed to business schools they certainly must accept some of it (Podolny, 2009). Business schools have done very well in teaching the techniques, skills and tools of the substantive disciplines – marketing, finance, operations and so forth. But the high proportion of MBAs amongst the felons behind the scandals suggests that there has been a failure to instill a sense of integrity or moral responsibility into students. This criticism is given peculiar immediacy by the recent collapse, but it is hardly new. Khurana (2009) provides a history of the long standing tension within management education between educating students in the technical aspects of management and engaging in the formation of the personal and professional characteristics that are required if business is to fulfill its social responsibility and graduates are to be leaders of integrity. Even if the social responsibility of business is solely to increase its profits as Friedman (1970) claimed, it must, as he noted, do so within the laws and the 'rules of the game'. Too many graduates of business schools have not adhered to this limitation.

If the current concern for ethical education is not to suffer the fate of previous efforts and quietly fade away then a change of approach, it seems reasonable to claim, is required. Some years ago Piper et al. (1993), in the aftermath of the insider trading scandals of the 1980s, developed an approach to ethics education that was introduced with some success into the program at Harvard Business School. The success was in implementing a mandatory course in ethics into the program. The more challenging part of their recommendation was the integration of ethics education into the business school experience as a whole. While some progress has been made recent events indicate that an effective approach to nurturing ethical business practitioners is a challenge as yet not fully met. In this chapter we suggest a way in which management education can be reoriented to accomplish that integration

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