

Chapter 9

Is It Ethical? A Multidimensional Approach to Facilitating Ethical Decision Making in Students

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ABSTRACT

The need for ethical leadership continues to become increasingly important as the environment grows more interconnected and complex. Educators are being called upon to assist in the development of ethical leaders; however, ethical decision-making, because of its complex nature, is not something that can be taught in a simple, straight forward fashion. This chapter provides an overview of a variety of strategies regarding when, what, and how to teach ethics and presents an instructional module in ethical decision-making, grounded in scholarly literature. The module can be used to provide depth and richness for undergraduate and graduate university students by creating an opportunity for them to ponder ethical situations, mull over and debate alternatives based on philosophical lenses, and arrive at decisions, which are probably not identical, but personally defensible. The educational unit focuses on developing awareness of one's own ethical stance as well as teaching the utility of a system for ethical analysis which allows for contextual difference, nuance and complexity rather than imposing one set of moral standards. In addition, several keys to effective ethics instruction are suggested.

IS IT ETHICAL? A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO FACILITATING ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING IN STUDENTS

Leaders have been doing the same kinds of things for a long time – they organize people, initiate change, arouse conflicts and settle them. Ethics concerns the morality of their goals and what

they do and how they treat people in the course of achieving those goals - (Burns, 2006, p. 237)

It should be easy to answer questions and make decisions using an ethical perspective. *Is that right or fair? Would my family approve? Do I have a duty to act? Should I do the right thing? Why then does there seem to be such a prevalence of scandal, corruption, and less than ethical activity*

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in many sectors of business, politics and society? New ethical dilemmas continue to emerge as technology and other innovations expand the scope of possible choices. In addition, as business becomes more globalized and the world becomes more interconnected, one must also reconcile cultural differences exerting influence over the “ethicality” of decisions and standards of practice. In light of the current environment, it becomes 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).

Several scholars purport that the personal ethics of leaders impact the followers in their organizations and the organizations themselves (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Ciulla, 2004; Gardner & Schmermerhorn, 2004; Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005). The extent to which ethics instruction can change moral standards, however, has been debated and 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. After a review of the literature, Williams and Dewett (2005) concluded that the evidence shows business ethics instruction is indeed worthwhile. However, one can also find studies indicating that limited exposure to ethics instruction may not show a significant effect. (See Cagle, *et. al.*, for example).

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 unit 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.

WHEN TO TEACH ETHICS: SINGLE COURSE OR INTEGRATION?

Although there has been significant debate about whether ethics should be taught in a single course or integrated in several courses throughout the curriculum, the consensus that is emerging suggests that both methods are necessary for impact.

Proponents of the single course model assert that it provides a clearer focus, makes a more profound impact on students, and establishes a framework for future decision-making (O’Leary,

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