



Contributors

Mary Gentile: Missing the point on biz ethics

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THE FALLOUT from 34 MBA students at Duke University having been caught cheating on an exam recently has put business education in the limelight once again. Business education hasn't received this much attention since Enron and WorldCom.

But the criticism and rebuttals have focused once more on whether business ethics can or should be taught. Instead, we should focus on teaching business students who already recognize right from wrong how to act on those values in the business world.

Business-ethics courses spend a lot of time teaching ethical theories and analyzing those big, thorny ethical dilemmas — ones that can trigger what one professor called "ethics fatigue." Whether students find such

approaches intellectually engaging or tedious and irrelevant, all too often they experience them as a primer on how to frame an ethical case to justify any position, no matter how cynical or self-serving. After all, utilitarianism is just made for a free-market economy.

And as for those “ethical dilemmas,” too often they are couched as the kinds of choices that only a chief executive could love — because only a CEO would confront them. Suffice it to say that the average 30-year-old MBA graduate is not going to decide whether to run that pipeline across the pristine wilderness or whether to close that company’s manufacturing plant.

When scandals arise, the skeptics snicker: “I told you so. You can’t teach business ethics; a business-school course in philosophy or worse, soft-headed corporate social responsibility is just a politically correct exercise in cynicism.”

The business-ethics professors patiently and reasonably argue: “Wait a minute! Did you really think that inserting one, often brief ethics course into the MBA curriculum would prevent all scandals? Does an accounting course prevent all balance-sheet errors, or does a strategy course ensure optimal competitive positioning? Why do we hold ethics courses to a higher standard?”

Let’s not repeat this argument about whether ethics should be taught.

Let’s talk instead about what should be in those courses and to whom they should be addressed.

Rather than viewing ethics courses as a way to “fix” unethical students, let’s focus on the majority of students who want to act on their values but are not at all convinced that it’s feasible to do so. In their survey of MBA students several years ago, the Aspen Institute found that the majority believed that they would be asked to do things in their careers that would conflict with their values; that this conflict would be stressful for them; and that they didn’t feel equipped to deal with that choice when it arose. These are not students who don’t recognize ethical choices. They are not even people who don’t want to do the ethical thing. In many cases, they simply don’t know how to do it effectively.

Of course, that little modifier — “effectively” — can mean different things to different people. For some, “effectiveness” may mean that they are not systematically disadvantaged for taking their stand. In the case of those MBAs who cheated on their exam, often the excuse is: “Everyone is doing it so why should I be disadvantaged in the grading curve by not cheating?”

And for others “effectiveness” may mean doing the “right” thing in such a way that it makes a positive difference; that is, they don’t want to take a stand (and perhaps take a hit) against “cooking the books” if someone else is just going to walk in and do it anyway. For both of these groups, ethics discussions need to be less about what’s right and more about how to change the system, whether that means building a coalition of peers or convincing one’s boss (or professor) that there is a better approach.

And some just don’t have any idea what to say when the boss tells them to adjust their financial analysis before sending it to the client, or when team mates ask them to shift reported expenses from one quarter to the next in order to improve the numbers. They know it doesn’t feel right but it seems to be the norm and they don’t have a script at the ready to use, to slow down the action, to open the conversation, to make room for others to express their concerns, too, if they share them.

In research we conducted for a new curriculum, “Giving Voice to Values,” sponsored by the Aspen Institute and the Yale School of Management, we have learned five important things:

- Many ethical choices are not really “dilemmas.” That is, many times the “right” decision is rather clear.
- Pretty much everybody has stories of times when they have, in fact, voiced and acted on their values, as well as stories of times when they have not. That is, we all have the ability to do both; most of the time, we are not talking about “good” people or “bad” people.”

- We can learn to voice our values more frequently and effectively if we understand the different factors that enable each of us to do so. That is, for some it may be fear of punishment and for others it may be the chance to make a positive difference. And we are more effective when we build on our individual strengths and “enablers” than when we focus on our weaknesses.
- Too often, classroom discussions of ethics spend more time analyzing what the “right” thing to do is and what the rationalizations are for not doing it, than they do on crafting potential action plans and “scripts” to respond to those rationalizations. This time allocation should be balanced, if not reversed.
- Instead of asking “what would you do?” ethical-case discussions should ask the question “what if I were going to act on my values? What would I do and say? To whom? How? In what sequence?”

As we pilot the “Giving Voice to Values” curriculum we have seen that when class discussions shift in this way, it can be magical. Suddenly, the proof of students’ savvy and smarts shifts from their competing to see who can be the most “knowing” about the ubiquity of bad actors out there, to collaborating to build the most effective strategy and script for addressing those inevitable ethical choices they all know they will face.

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