

Value-Acquisition Leadership Development Through Guided Self- Reflection

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Abstract. Unethical leadership and dishonest business practices have created a global crisis of confidence in business leaders, highlighting the need for higher education to prepare graduates who are ethical, transparent, empathetic, and trustworthy. Although business curricula include ethics, cultivating enduring moral habits remains a persistent challenge. This qualitative, holistic case study examined how undergraduate business students engaged in self-reflection on their leadership and ethical values within the *Differentiation of Personal and Professional Values* course. A total of 235 colloquium logs from 16 junior-level students were analyzed using value, magnitude, and focused coding. Self-reflection emerged as both a humbling developmental process and a safeguard against unethical behavior. Students differentiated ethical behaviors such as humility, empathy, honesty, and fairness from unethical behaviors rooted in arrogance, self-interest, and lack of empathy. Progression through Bloom's affective domain indicates that structured, values-based reflection can cultivate ethically grounded leadership and strengthen moral decision-making in undergraduate business education.

Keywords: Bloom's Taxonomy, empathy, humility, affective, leadership development, self-reflection, values.

1. Introduction

Emerging discussions within the business and academic communities suggest that current approaches to business ethics education may not fully equip graduates to navigate the complex ethical challenges of contemporary organizations (Chen et al., 2023; Hoffman, 2021; Singer & Diab, 2021). While most business programs incorporate ethics-related content, persistent challenges remain in cultivating enduring ethical habits among graduates (Jaganjac et al., 2023; Wingate et al., 2023). This gap has contributed to a global crisis of confidence in business leadership, raising a central question: What type of learning environment best supports students in acquiring and strengthening their ethical and personal value systems?

The debate is not whether ethics should be taught but how, either as a stand-alone course or integrated throughout the business curriculum (Fang & O'Toole,

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2023; Parks-Leduc et al., 2021). Despite these efforts, business education continues to emphasize analytical and technical skills over affective and interpersonal competencies. However, the affective domain, which fosters empathy, moral reasoning, and ethical awareness, plays a central role in preparing leaders for values-based and ethically responsible decision-making (Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018; Arain et al., 2017; Reilly, 2018). Moreover, a predominant focus on profit-driven models, especially in economics and business courses, can unintentionally cultivate self-interest, reinforcing the need for business students to develop empathy, ethical judgment, and self-awareness (Edwards & Gallagher, 2018; Menon, 2024). This gap highlights the importance of dedicated, structured opportunities for self-reflection, which enable students to internalize ethical principles and move beyond compliance toward value-driven behaviors and decision-making.

Self-reflection represents one pathway for cultivating these affective competencies. By critically examining their actions, motives, and values, students can connect abstract ethical concepts to their personal and professional identities, strengthening their ability to act with integrity in complex organizational settings (Hinkle, 2018; Tyran, 2017). However, there is limited knowledge about how undergraduate business students naturally engage in reflection when invited to confront their values in structured learning environments. Guided by this gap, the present study asks: How do students self-reflect on their leadership and ethical values as they consider their future careers in business in an era marked by ongoing media coverage of unethical leadership? To address this question, the study examined the Differentiation of Personal and Professional Values course. This course, designed for undergraduate business students, provides structured activities that enable students to explore and internalize value systems through reflection and applied learning. These experiences foster the development of ethical values essential for responsible behavior and sound decision-making.

2. Proposed Pedagogical Approach

The Differentiation of Personal and Professional Values course is a 15-week, two-hour program designed to help students integrate ethics and values into their developing leadership identities. Its foundation is Bloom's Taxonomy of the Affective Domain, which traces how values are internalized and acted upon. Students begin by receiving ethical concepts, developing awareness and openness to new ideas, and then respond through dialogue and exploration. As they progress, they begin valuing, assigning worth to ethical principles, and committing to upholding them. At the higher stages of organization and characterization, students weave these values into a coherent system and consistently embody them as part of their professional practice. Table 1 summarizes the stages and their alignment with the course.

Table 1: Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Affective Domain: Stages, Definitions, and Course Applications

Stage	Definition	Application in the Differentiation of Personal and Professional Values Course
Receiving	Willingness to attend to and be aware of new ideas, perspectives, and ethical concepts.	Students actively listen to peer viewpoints during colloquium discussions and demonstrate openness to ethical perspectives that differ from their own.
Responding	Active participation through engagement, feedback, and involvement in the learning process.	Students contribute to discussions, pose questions, and apply feedback from the facilitator in ethics-related case analyses.
Valuing	Assigning worth or importance to ethical principles and committing to them.	Students articulate personal values in written Colloquium logs and link these values to real-world ethical scenarios.
Organization	Integrating new values into an existing system involves prioritizing and reconciling the differences among them.	Students compare and prioritize personal and professional values in their experiential projects, creating a coherent value framework.
Characterization	Acting consistently with one’s value system so it becomes part of one’s character.	Students design a personal leadership philosophy statement that aligns with their ethical values and commit to applying it in future professional roles.

This developmental arc frames the course design and reflects the understanding that effective management depends not only on technical competence but also on ethical responsibility and sound human judgment. In contemporary business environments, managers often encounter conflicts between personal moral compasses, organizational goals, and societal expectations (Burrell et al., 2018). Without deliberate reflection and structured opportunities to engage with these dynamics, decision-making can become inconsistent or ethically compromised.

The pedagogical approach highlights the dual role of managers as individuals shaped by personal convictions and as professionals guided by organizational codes, legal frameworks, and industry standards. Preparing students for inevitable value conflicts, balancing profitability with social responsibility, or reconciling loyalty to colleagues with accountability to stakeholders, is central to developing ethical resilience (Demirci, 2019; Kabeyi, 2019). Through guided exploration, students learn to recognize how their values inform leadership styles and to maintain moral integrity under professional pressure (Burrell et al., 2018).

Further, the course emphasizes that effective leadership emerges when personal values are consciously integrated with professional obligations rather than suppressed or abandoned. Leaders who navigate ethical challenges transparently and consistently can cultivate trust, credibility, and stronger relationships with employees, clients, and the wider community (Taylor et al.,

2017; Tyran, 2017). This value-centered preparation can equip future leaders not only with managerial expertise but also with the ethical grounding necessary for responsible, sustainable, and socially accountable leadership.

3. Course Design and Learning Environment

The course design bridges theoretical ethics instruction and the lived practice of ethical leadership by aligning with the affective learning stages outlined in Section Two. Delivered in a non-passive colloquium format, students sit in a circle to foster equality, trust, and continuous dialogue on ethics, values, decision-making, and leadership (Alicea, 1974; Rogers & Frieberg, 1983; Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2019). This format promotes spontaneous interaction and eye contact, encouraging students to voice diverse perspectives and refine their personal values (Mills, 1990; V.G. Alicea, personal communication, October 11, 2018). The educational facilitator guides discussions, introduces alternative viewpoints, and ensures balanced participation to sustain a respectful, participatory environment.

Intentionally designing activities that invite reflection and dialogue, the facilitator engages students in deeper ethical exploration and an approach addressing the gap between undergraduate preparation and the ethical expectations of modern business leadership (Kiersch & Peters, 2017; Munro & Thanen, 2018; Wingate et al., 2023). After each class, the students complete colloquium logs to record their key insights and value-based takeaways, a practice that reinforces affective learning while building habits of self-reflection (see Section 4.2 for details). These logs, combined with experiential projects and thematic discussions, provide a scaffolded path for developing ethical reasoning and decision-making skills.

Table 2 outlines the interactive learning activities and their alignment with affective stages. In contrast, Table 4 presents the 15-week progression of topics and activities, illustrating how the curriculum guides students from initial awareness to the internalization of ethical values.

Table 2: 15-Week Course Schedule: Differentiation of Personal and Professional Values

Week	Topic / Focus	Learning Activities	Affective Domain Stage
1	Course Introduction & Understanding Values	Orientation to personal vs. professional values; initial self-assessment survey; class discussion on “What are values?”	Receiving
2	Core vs. Ancillary Values	Group activity distinguishing negotiable vs. non-negotiable values; reflection in colloquium log	Receiving Responding
3	Value Acquisition	Lecture + discussion on how family, culture, and workplace shape values; small-group sharing of personal stories	Receiving Responding