An Ethics Briefing to an Executive Team: Going from a Problem to Formal Recommendations

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Abstract. Business ethics education is most effective when students take an active approach and must respond to various demands and feedback. In this paper we describe a classroom exercise in which students are tasked with delivering an ethics briefing to "executive teams" (role played by other students or even by real executives). Through a combination of individual analysis and group work, students become immersed in real-world ethics problem-solving, in which there are no easy solutions. Students must defend their ethical recommendations as well as challenge those from other groups. The exercise concerns an existing controversial business called Seeking Arrangement. Survey results from graduate students who have participated in the exercise reveal that it is effective in producing better ethics problem solving, as well as greater confidence in addressing ethical issues.

Keywords: teaching business ethics, experiential learning, ethics briefing, classroom exercise, critical thinking.

1. Introduction

The enormous disruption (Holtom & Dierdorff 2013) that is pervading management education is growing steadily, mirroring that of other professions and industries (such as taxis, the music industry, and retail businesses), and portending frightening predictions for education and our profession (Christensen *et al.* 2008). There is a growing sense that much of this disruption is driven by a realization that our approach to management education is only marginally relevant (Starkey & Madan, 2001) both from a research and educational perspective (Bartunek & Rynes 2014, Gordon & Howell 1959, Hambrick 1994,

Pfeffer & Fong 2002). Furthermore, our historical format of "one size fits all" classrooms (despite differing learning styles, intelligence, and starting points) (Christensen *et al.* 2008) and educating within our silos of specializations (Holtom & Dierdorff 2013) can lead to management curricula that pay too little attention to integrative concepts such as ethics (Swanson 2004).

In addition to these structural concerns, one of the more significant criticisms of business education is that we are failing to teach students the skills they need to succeed in an organizational environment. Higher education is criticized for being strong on research and theory, but weak on connecting research to practical implications (Eckhardt & Wetherbe 2014). Notably, this debate of relevance and practicality is not new. Twenty years ago, Porter and McKibbin (1988) reported that corporations believe business schools provide adequate quantitative and analytical skills, but not enough leadership and management (e.g., "soft" skills). Although courses in leadership and organizational behavior have been added to most management curricula, we need to continue to create a better learning environment based on diverse learning styles and complex non-siloed career options so that graduates can "hit the ground running" with confidence (Porter & McKibbin 1988). As part of this learning environment, it is important to integrate more teaching of ethics and values into business programs (Giacalone *et al.* 2014). Today, much of the practitioner and academic writing stresses the importance of critical and creative thinking (Everson 2014, Martin 2011, Parker 2011), and has been met with different critical thinking approaches (Dean & Boose 2004, Nash 1981) and creativity/innovation approaches (Norton & Hale 2011).

But even when we effectively bring about critical and creative thinking, with students taken out of their comfort zone and learning to problem-solve, many of them do not know how to compile, integrate, and present their approaches into a form that would be understandable and actionable for their bosses. This skill set requires content knowledge (theory and practice), quantitative/analytic skills, strong communication and social skills, as well as the ability to think on their feet during a meeting or other forum where the audience or "executive team" is challenging their proposal. In essence, educators are tasked with bridging the safe harbor of a classroom with the more chaotic world of management (Gabrielsson *et al.* 2010).

The problem is particularly acute in the area of ethics. Despite the many theoretical (Andersen *et al.* 2015, Jones *et al.* 2018) and conceptual approaches (Heimo *et al.* 2018), disciplinary foci (e.g., Laczniak & Murphy 2019), cultural contexts (e.g., Fukukawa *et al.* 2019) identification of problem areas (Eisend 2019, Williams 2018), multidisciplinary approaches (e.g., Swanson & Fisher 2008), and assessment techniques (e.g., Swanson & Fisher 2010), the education of ethics is hampered by a weakness in real-world problem solving (see Giacalone 2015, for a critique). With so many exercises and experiential approaches in the literature (Comer & Schwartz 2017, Fleig-Palmer *et al.* 2012, Rainey 2011),

students appear "classroom bound" with exercises that do an excellent job of teaching concepts, but do not help students master the skill of handling ethical issues within the contexts of real organizations.

As such, the ethics exercise we describe focuses on how to get students to critically evaluate a problem, develop a series of recommendations based on prior course content, explain and justify their approach, role play different stakeholder perspectives, and brief an executive team with the suggestions they have compiled. The exercise itself serves to integrate previously learned conceptual information with the realities of translating ethical thinking and problem solving in a manner that is understandable to high-level decision makers.

To date we have only used this exercise with graduate students. We believe that this exercise is workable in undergraduate courses, but only in upper level classes and with a recognition that instructors may need to spend additional time with the students helping them to prepare. Further, although we have used the exercise in business ethics classes, it could be used in a variety of business courses when discussing the ethical issues in those subject areas. For example, the exercise could be adapted to brief an executive team on the ethics of an advertising campaign (in a marketing class) or the ethics of an employee recruiting strategy (in a human resources class). We suggest if the exercise is used in a non-ethics class, that the students be provided with some supplementary readings in both general ethics and topic-specific ethics. In terms of timing, we position the exercise in the middle of the course, after students have been exposed to the basics of ethics and social responsibility.

2. Overview of the Exercise

Students are first presented with an ethical issue related to an existing business (described below). Students determine responses to the problem, present their case, and respond to the executive teams (role played by other student groups and by actual executives when possible—please see explanation below). This exercise provides a two- pronged opportunity for students. First, it allows them to critically evaluate a situation, creatively address the ethical issues, and present recommendations to an executive team that may or may not be receptive. Second, it allows students the opportunity to play the role of a decision maker on an executive team. By using students as both presenters and mock executives, the classroom becomes a place that mimics the type of experience they will face in their work life. It is common for managers to both challenge and be challenged during meetings/presentations; causes for criticism range from politics, threats to resources, individual differences in interpretations, and management's basic obligation to vet new ideas and be fiscally responsible. Hence, students (as future managers or executives) will find it necessary to develop skills in posing valid criticisms in a professional manner.