

# Business Ethics: Tool for Sustainable Business

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**Abstract**— *Ethics involves learning what is right or wrong, and then doing the right thing- but "the right thing" is not nearly as straightforward as conveyed in a great deal of business ethics literature. Most ethical dilemmas in the workplace are not so a simple matter. Philosophers have been discussing ethics for at least 2500 years, since the time of Socrates and Plato. Many ethicists consider emerging ethical beliefs to be "state of the art" legal matters, i.e., what becomes an ethical guideline today is often translated to a law, regulation or rule tomorrow. Values which guide how we ought to behave are considered moral values, e.g., values such as respect, honesty, fairness, responsibility, etc. Statements around how these values are applied are sometimes called moral or ethical principles. Many ethicists assert there's always a right thing to do based on moral principle and others believe the right thing to do depends on the situation -- ultimately it's up to the individual.*

**Keywords**— *Ethics, Right, Wrong, Business Ethics, Legal, Moral, Individual.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

### What is Business Ethics?

The concept has come to mean various things to various people, but generally it's coming to know what is right or wrong in the workplace and doing what's right -- this is in regard to effects of products/services and in relationships with stakeholders. Wallace and Pekel explain that attention to business ethics is critical during times of fundamental change -- times much like those faced now by businesses, both nonprofit or for-profit. In times of fundamental change, values that were previously taken for granted are now strongly questioned. Many of these values are no longer followed. Consequently, there is no clear moral compass to guide leaders through complex dilemmas about what is right or wrong. Attention to ethics in the workplace sensitizes leaders and staff to how they should act. Perhaps most important, attention to ethics in the workplaces helps ensure that when leaders and managers are struggling in times of crises and confusion, they retain a strong moral compass. However, attention to business ethics provides numerous other benefits, as well.

Many people react that business ethics, with its continuing attention to "doing the right thing," only asserts the obvious ("be good," "don't lie," etc.), and so these people don't take business ethics seriously. For many of us, these principles of the obvious can go right out the door during times of stress. Consequently, business ethics can be strong preventative medicine. Anyway, there are many other benefits of managing ethics in the workplace.

**Business ethics** (also known as **corporate ethics**) is a form of applied ethics or professional ethics that examines ethical principles and moral or ethical problems that arise in a business environment. It applies to all aspects of business conduct and is relevant to the conduct of individuals and entire organizations.

It refers to contemporary standards or sets of values that govern the actions and behavior of an individual in the business organization. Business ethics has normative and descriptive dimensions. As a corporate practice and a career specialization, the field is primarily normative. Academics attempting to understand business behavior employ descriptive methods. The range and quantity of business ethical issues reflects the interaction of profit-maximizing behavior with non-economic concerns.

Interest in business ethics accelerated dramatically during the 1980s and 1990s, both within major corporations and within academia. For example, most major corporations today promote their commitment to non-economic values under headings such as ethics codes and social responsibility charters.

Adam Smith said, "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices." Governments use laws and regulations to point business behavior in what they perceive to be beneficial directions. Ethics implicitly regulates areas and details of behavior that lie beyond governmental control. The emergence of large corporations with limited relationships and sensitivity to the communities in which they operate accelerated the development of formal ethics regimes.

## History

Business ethical norms reflect the norms of each historical period. As time passes norms evolve, causing accepted behaviors to become objectionable.

The term 'business ethics' came into common use in the United States in the early 1970s. By the mid-1980s at least 500 courses in business ethics reached 40,000 students, using some twenty textbooks and at least ten casebooks along supported by professional societies, centers and journals of business ethics. The Society for Business Ethics was started in 1980. European business schools adopted business ethics after 1987 commencing with the European Business Ethics Network (EBEN). In 1982 the first single-authored books in the field appeared.

Firms started highlighting their ethical stature in the late 1980s and early 1990s, possibly trying to distance themselves from the business scandals of the day. The idea of business ethics caught the attention of academics, media and business firms by the end of the Cold War. However, criticism of business practices was attacked for infringing the freedom of entrepreneurs and critics were accused of supporting communists. This scuttled the discourse of business ethics both in media and academia.

## II. DISCUSSION

Business ethics reflects the philosophy of business, of which one aim is to determine the fundamental purposes of a company. If a company's purpose is to maximize shareholder returns, then sacrificing profits to other concerns is a violation of its fiduciary responsibility. Corporate entities are legally considered as persons in most nations. The 'corporate persons' are legally entitled to the rights and liabilities due to citizens as persons.

Ethics are the rules or standards that govern our decisions on a daily basis. Many equate "ethics" with conscience or a simplistic sense of "right" and "wrong." Others would say that ethics is an internal code that governs an individual's conduct, ingrained into each person by family, faith, tradition, community, laws, and personal mores. Corporations and professional organizations, particularly licensing boards, generally will have a written "Code of Ethics" that governs standards of professional conduct expected of all in the field. It is important to note that "law" and "ethics" are not synonymous, nor are the "legal" and "ethical" courses of action in a given situation necessarily the same. Statutes and regulations passed by legislative bodies and administrative boards set forth the "law." Slavery once was legal in the US, but one certainly wouldn't say enslaving another was an "ethical" act.

Economist Milton Friedman writes that corporate executives' "responsibility... generally will be to make as much money as possible while conforming to their basic rules of the society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom". Friedman also said, "the only entities who can have responsibilities are individuals ... A business cannot have responsibilities. So the question is, do corporate executives, provided they stay within the law, have responsibilities in their business activities other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible? And my answer to that is, no, they do not." A multi-country 2011 survey found support for this view among the "informed public" ranging from 30 to 80%.

Ronald Duska views Friedman's argument as consequentialist rather than pragmatic, implying that unrestrained corporate freedom would benefit the most in long term. Similarly author business consultant Peter Drucker observed, "There is neither a separate ethics of business nor is one needed", implying that standards of personal ethics cover all business situations. However, Peter Drucker in another instance observed that the ultimate responsibility of company directors is not to harm—*primum non nocere*. Another view of business is that it must exhibit corporate social responsibility (CSR): an umbrella term indicating that an ethical business must act as a responsible citizen of the communities in which it operates even at the cost of profits or other goals. In the US and most other nations corporate entities are legally treated as persons in some respects. For example, they can hold title to property, sue and be sued and are subject to taxation, although their free speech rights are limited. This can be interpreted to imply that they have independent ethical responsibilities. Duska argues that stakeholders have the right to expect a business to be ethical; if business has no ethical obligations, other institutions could make the same claim which would be counterproductive to the corporation. Ethical issues include the rights and duties between a company and its employees, suppliers, customers and neighbors, its fiduciary responsibility to its shareholders. Issues concerning relations between different companies include hostile take-overs and industrial espionage. Related issues include corporate governance; corporate social entrepreneurship; political contributions; legal issues such as the ethical debate over introducing a crime of corporate manslaughter; and the marketing of corporations' ethics policies.

## III. DEVELOPING CODES OF ETHICS

According to Wallace, "A credo generally describes the highest values to which the company aspires to operate. It

contains the 'thou shalt.' A code of ethics specifies the ethical rules of operation. It's the 'thou shalt not.'

Some business ethicists disagree that codes have any value. Usually they explain that too much focus is put on the codes themselves, and that codes themselves are not influential in managing ethics in the workplace. Many ethicists note that it's the developing and continuing dialogue around the code's values that is most important.

#### **Developing Codes of Conduct**

If your organization is quite large, e.g., includes several large programs or departments, you may want to develop an overall corporate code of ethics and then a separate code to guide each of your programs or departments. Codes should not be developed out of the Human Resource or Legal departments alone, as is too often done. Codes are insufficient if intended only to ensure that policies are legal. All staff must see the ethics program being driven by top management.

Note that codes of ethics and codes of conduct may be the same in some organizations, depending on the organization's culture and operations and on the ultimate level of specificity in the code(s).

#### **Resolving Ethical Dilemmas and Making Ethical Decisions**

Perhaps too often, business ethics is portrayed as a matter of resolving conflicts in which one option appears to be the clear choice. For example, case studies are often presented in which an employee is faced with whether or not to lie, steal, cheat, abuse another, break terms of a contract, etc. However, ethical dilemmas faced by managers are often more real-to-life and highly complex with no clear guidelines, whether in law or often in religion.

Doug Wallace, a consultant, explains that one knows when they have a significant ethical conflict when there is presence of a) significant value conflicts among differing interests, b) real alternatives that are equally justifiable, and c) significant consequences on "stakeholders" in the situation.

#### **Assessing and Cultivating Ethical Culture**

Culture is comprised of the values, norms, folkways and behaviors of an organization. Ethics is about moral values, or values regarding right and wrong. Therefore, cultural assessments can be extremely valuable when assessing the moral values in an organization.

#### **Ethics Training**

The ethics program is essentially useless unless all staff members are trained about what it is, how it works and their roles in it. The nature of the system may invite suspicion if not handled openly and honestly. In addition, no matter how fair and up-to-date is a set of policies, the legal system will

often interpret employee behavior (rather than written policies) as de facto policy. Therefore, all staff must be aware of and act in full accordance with policies and procedures (this is true, whether policies and procedures are for ethics programs or personnel management). This full accordance requires training about policies and procedures.

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