TO THE POINT

Dispatches from the Ethical Frontier

It Ain’t All Bad (Or at Least, It Shouldn’t Be): Why Ethics Education Needs to Stay Positive

When designing ethics curriculum, focusing on the examples of failed ethics could actually decrease ethical behavior of students and trainees.

In almost any discussion of business ethics, things start off with a litany of transgressions: Enron, Madoff, and on from there. We seemingly can’t help but set the stage by taking about what’s gone wrong. But in her recent research Look at the Bright Side: A Comparison of Positive and Negative Role Models in Business Ethics Education, Denise Baden of the Southampton Management School suggests that this negative emphasis sets a perception of business that may in fact be reducing the likelihood of ethical behavior among business students. And if this is happening with students, it may be happening in corporate compliance trainings and workshops as well.

Baden’s interest in the issue of negative and positive examples in business ethics curricula stemmed from the growing dissatisfaction with the ethical effectiveness of business school curriculum. Faced with the recent ethical failings of businesses and the ensuing dire consequences for the global economy, many are calling for a reassessment of how well business schools are educating their students.

Knowing this, Baden designed an experiment to test how negative and positive role models affect students’ ethical behavior intentions. The experiment tested two modules of undergraduate business majors for 10 weeks, with each group receiving positive role models (PRMs) for 5 weeks and negative role models (NRMNs) for 5 weeks. After the 10 week course, the students completed a survey on the effects of the PRMs versus the NRMNs on their perceptions and beliefs.

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The results? We need to be more positive when teaching about ethics. Negative examples have their place, but without positive role models, we could be not only failing to teach ethical behavior, but actually increasing unethical behavior.
We need to think about how we talk about ethics in business when we’re trying to foster more ethical business leaders. Whether we're training university students, MBAs, or employees, teaching only the unethical side of business can end up perpetuating unethical behavior and silencing those who would speak up if they felt like it would make a difference. In the words of Dr. Denise Baden, we must “walk a fine line between making students aware of possible ethical pitfalls in business, without giving the impression that unethical behavior is the norm.”

Students who received PRMs were inspired, empowered, and optimistic. They believed that being ethical in business was possible, they had ideas on how to do it, and they felt compelled to do it. Their self-efficacy (sense that what they did mattered) was higher, and their descriptive norms about the business world were more positive and ethical. Those students who received the NRMs, on the other hand, had much bleaker outcomes. They were more aware of the consequences of unethical behavior and formed stronger injunctive norms against unethical behavior than did the students who received PRMs, but they also experienced reduced self-efficacy and formed descriptive normative beliefs that business was inherently flawed, and that they could do little to change that.

The two different role models interacted with each other as well, with the PRMs softening the cynicism produced by the NRMs and the NRMs lessening the empowering impact of the PRMs. In the end, the NRMs had a stronger emotional impact, and therefore were more affecting than the PRMs.

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So, what do we take from this? According the Baden’s framework, lower self-efficacy and negative descriptive norms could mean that the students who receive only NRMs just give up on behaving ethically, or in the worst case, may even engage in “defensive ethics” to avoid being the sucker who follows the rules and loses while everyone else cheats and wins. Conversely, the students who get PRMs will be more likely to take an ethical stand because they know others have before and they believe it might make a difference.

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Key Points

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