

Ethics Problems or Causes

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Much of today's business ethics really amounts to little more than "damage control." It is an approach to ethics focused on containing harms from problems already spinning out of control. It concentrates on the critical messes at the end of processes that have gone awry. It is crisis oriented, reactive, negative, and narrow. Confronted by various moral dilemmas or quandaries (usually getting our attention because of a threat of litigation or a brand-tarnishing scandal) we choose how best to "muddle through" and minimize the negative consequences. Sometimes we don't get much beyond figuring out who is to blame and who will be the scapegoat in the crisis.

Sounds pretty bad but certainly this kind of "damage control" (better termed ethical "trouble-shooting" and "crisis management") is an important activity. All organizations need to put systems and processes in place to do this as well as possible and minimize the bleeding in these circumstances.

But if we think of ethics *only* as a matter of damage control of agonizing quandaries, we will never address the sources of these problems or the conditions which make our organizations susceptible to their cancerous growth. There is a better way, one that is proactive, positive, and holistic.

As an analogy, think about our physical health. Focusing only on treating our accidents and illnesses would be a damage control approach. A better way is to invest our attention in a proactive health-building program of good exercise, nutrition, rest, safety habits and the like.

Or think about an athletic team. Of course great teams have to figure out how to contain the most threatening players and strategic moves of the upcoming opposition. But if they want victory and excellence, they must invest major attention in developing their own plays and strategies so that they don't just react to the opposition but actually dictate the course of the game.

An example of damage control ethics is sexual harassment training—obligatory in so many organizations today. It is motivated in large part by a fear of lawsuits. If the organization can show (in court) that an alleged harasser went through the training and signed off in agreement with organizational policies on these matters, they are (better) protected from having to pay major damages or suffer a public relations disaster. Unfortunately, this kind of training has to be done; I'm not objecting to it at all.

But what about a proactive effort by leadership to build a culture of *respect* for one another? If we build a culture of respect and professionalism in our behavior and communication . . . if we can show that our individual and corporate success and excellence are clearly served by such a culture . . . we are much less likely to have problems of sexual harassment and much more likely to have effective teams and working relationships. But how many organizations even think this thought?

An organization needs a "code" of some sort, a collection of guidelines (ethical and otherwise) for "how we do the things we do" on our way to success and excellence. An organization needs effective training and communication. And an organization needs effective trouble-shooting and decision-making processes in place. But none of these can serve as the foundation of company ethics and excellence.

The starting point is *mission* (vision and purpose are closely related concepts and have the same relationship to corporate ethics as does mission). What is the basic, fundamental purpose of our company? Why do we exist? How can we summarize the fundamental product or service we bring—in light of which our customers are willing to part with their money?

When the mission is clear, authentic, and taps into our humanity in a constructive way, it can leverage a will to both ethics and excellence in the organization. The appropriateness and validity of our company's ethics code and training lie in their relationship to our mission. Do they help us get to where we want to go? Are they in alignment with our mission?

We can recognize a sound ethics the way we recognize a good map. A good map will guide us to our chosen destination (not lead us astray). If we get off track we can study the map and find our way back. We accept a map because "it works for us" and because we know that it has worked for others. What does a good ethical map work "for"? Where does it lead us? The first question in ethics is "what is our ultimate destination or goal?" What is our purpose, our mission, our vision?

The great philosopher Aristotle began his most famous book on ethics by writing, "The good is that at which everything aims." Aristotle considered it essential to begin ethics by asking just what our appropriate aim should be. For Aristotle, the character virtues of justice, wisdom, courage, moderation, friendliness, and so on, are justified because they are conducive to the achievement of life's purpose. This was the classical, traditional way of thinking about ethics: it's all about purposes and communities (not just about jail avoidance, etc.).

When I first got behind the wheel of a car as a teenager (on an Oregon back road while on a family vacation) I scared my family to death by the way I steered. The car jerked back and forth left and right. My dad grabbed the wheel and advised "look farther down the road as you drive." I did and soon everyone was breathing more easily. I had thought I should drive by looking at the center line just in front of the car's left front fender, but I needed a longer range perspective to steer us smoothly forward. To drive well we need good peripheral vision and good reactions to immediate crises (deer runs across road, muffler and debris in lane, etc.). But the longer range perspective is basic and essential.

As long as we stick with the damage control approach to ethics, jerking back and forth as we react first to this crisis case, then to that one, we are not going to make any real progress in improving the ethical health of our organizations. First, get the mission straight. Second, build a corporate culture in alignment with that mission, one that empowers us to achieve our mission with excellence. It is on that foundation that an exemplary ethics will be built.