

The Role of Ethics in the Business Management Classroom

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Every class I teach is exactly the same. Well, at least for the first two class meetings of each term. During that time, I present an overview of ethical frameworks that students might use to make business decisions. As I lay out the four basic ethical decision models, the students nod, wink at each other, and then rationalize all manner of unethical behavior: “Everyone else does it, and therefore...”; “Who are you to judge the rightness of other people’s motivation”; or, “My behavior is certainly warranted given the particular circumstances that you have described.” Duly, I point out the shortcomings of their reasoning, argue for a time using variations of examples that I know are difficult to refute, and then hope that when these students enter the workforce they will do the right thing. Increasingly, though, this seems insufficient.

Business students often focus on the operations level of the job they are about to apply for or to start—*what*, *when*, and *where* questions. Taking time to focus on virtue may seem esoteric to such students. However, while business decisions have both an economic and ethical component, the ethical component may be more difficult to discern. Virtue ethics provides students with a way to guide their decision making beyond simply applying a rule (e.g., would I take this action if it applied to everyone?) or applying a test to their decision (would I maximize the greater good for people?). Applying a virtue-based approach takes business decisions beyond simply weighing situational factors.

It is important for students to understand that virtues such as honesty, compassion, fair-mindedness are acquired over time. From the perspective of virtue ethics, achieving professional success is at its core a willingness to embrace a totally moral purpose and process. The traditional approach to business ethics is to provide students (or employees) with a set of rules they can apply to classroom cases or work-world situations. Students often focus on the external personal goods they may acquire and mostly miss the idea that there is a business life to be lived that has its genesis in the acquisition of desirable character traits or virtues.