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Organizational Communication Ethics: The Radical Perspective of Performance Management

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Abstract
Bibliographers have chronicled thousands of articles on business and organizational communication ethics. In spite of scholarly and professional interest shown in ethics, the field has not achieved status of a behavioral science. The authors posit that this may be due, in part, to three factors: (1) the preoccupation with the "individual" as the primary level for analysis; (2) the tendency to attribute unethical acts to internal or "mentalistic" and moralistic states; and (3) the failure of scholars to make use of methodological and research advances in related disciplines. If the fields of applied business and organizational communication ethics are to advance, it is essential that scholars develop a research base that will assist organizational decision-makers in addressing ethical problems such as employee theft, racism, and sexism. To accomplish this objective, the authors argue that researchers need to study the scientific relationship between the organizational environment and ethical conduct. In conclusion, the authors discuss how scholars and managers might use the established disciplines of Applied Behavior Analysis and Performance Management to address a variety of important ethical problems.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, a number of scholars have noted with interest, and at times bemusement, the growing popularity of business ethics as a subject of lay and scholarly attention. In 1981, Peter Drucker labeled our preoccupation with business ethics as "chic." As far back as the seventies and the early eighties, Baum (1974) and Payne (1980) observed that notwithstanding the myriad of articles, symposia, and texts on the topic, business ethics had failed to achieve the status of a behavioral science. From their standpoint, the field of business ethics had produced "little direct, substantive research" (Payne, 1980 p.409). According to Bommer, Gratto, and Tuttle (1987), scholars relied too heavily on survey methodology and case studies. Moreover, scholars had, from Payne's (1980) perspective, neglected to incorporate important theoretical and research advances from other disciplines.

Unfortunately, many of the same criticisms are valid today. Redding (1996) for example, likens the search for "serious" research in organizational communication ethics to ". . . wandering in a lonely desert (p. 19)." Pincus Hartman, holder of the endowed Chair in Business Ethics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, notes that although interest in the field abounds, much of the dialog remains mired in philosophical and moral controversies and with little or no attention given to applied research (Pincus Hartman, April 1998) If the fields of applied business and organizational communication ethics are going to progress, they must develop a literature base on which researchers can build and on which practitioners, managers and

consultants, can rely for decision-making. Without this foundation, applied ethics will not achieve the status of a social science.

In this paper, the authors will argue that the failure of the field to develop as a social science may in part be attributed to: the field's focus on the individual as the source of ethical and unethical behavior; and its failure to scientifically study the relationship between ethical acts and the environment. The authors will argue that the organizational environment has not received the attention it deserves. Like Brandon, the authors believe that the workplace is ". . . a major transmitter of values. The principles by which it operates and the way it treats its employees, suppliers, and customers radiate out through the world like radio waves." And that, "Today, a business is more than a place to produce goods or services. It is a social club, a community, a school, and perhaps even, as a source for learned values, a church. It is an environment that can have a profound impact on souls. No one can remain unaffected by how he or she is treated eight hours a day, five days a week--nor by the ethical behavior witnessed in associates and superiors (pp.167-8)."

Combine Brandon's observation with the specter of global competition, the trends in mergers, down-sizing, and trends, it is surprising how little attention is given to the role of the organizational environment as a handmaiden of ethical and unethical behavior. Managers, consultants, and the lay community continue to focus on the individual as the primary causal agent. From this perspective, it is the individual who is accountable; it is the individual who is responsible.

Within this framework, the organizational environment is merely the stage or the backdrop for the undesired behavior. If the environment is discussed, it is, more often than not, cast in a similar light. Rather than blaming the employees, the responsibility is shifted to the management or the owners whose behavior is attributed to "avarice," "selfishness," "a lack of social concern," or a "culture of greed."

Whether the focus is on the individual employee or on the environment, what is missing is a scientific study of how the environment fosters and nurtures ethical and unethical conduct, and how the individuals, in turn, act to shape and mold that environment. The end result is that much of the discussion of business ethics reads more like a morality play than the work of serious scientific inquiry. Society seems more preoccupied with good versus evil than with finding practical solutions to important ethical problems. Rather than studying how to create environments that reduce racism, sexism, sexual harassment, or how to counteract the "glass ceiling," reduce employee theft or promote corporate responsibility, society seems more interested in ferreting out "the guilty" and exacting punishment.

In short, the fields of business ethics and applied organizational communication ethics have largely failed to provide organizational decision- makers with the methodologies they need to create a work environment that nurtures and supports ethical behavior.

Although there are a number of possible explanations for this failure, the authors posit that there are three related factors that are partially responsible. The first is society's preoccupation with the individual as the primary causal agent, and hence, the source of ethical and unethical behavior. Second, because scholars and managers attribute unethical behavior to the "inner" individual, in order to understand it one must delve into the psychological, moral, spiritual, and genetic origins of behavior. And third, by focusing on internal causes, it is not surprising that efforts to guide and correct behavior have, for the most part, been limited to discovering ways that alter internal states.

The Autonomous Individual

With some noteworthy exceptions, social scientists have been concerned with the study of the individual as the source of ethical and unethical behavior. Whether the quest has been genetic, biological, medical, or psychological, the focus has been on the individual. Individuals seek to explain behavior by looking inward (Skinner, 1971). Although recent developments in sociology, systems theory, and the like, have broadened inquiry, much of the literature, both professional and popular, is wedded to the notion of the individual as the causal agent. It is only in the last several decades, that social scientists have begun to question the concept of the "autonomous" individual (Skinner, 1971). In the study of human behavior, scientists and

laymen alike have assumed that, to a large extent, individuals possess free will, that they are capable of choosing their own destiny, and that they are responsible for their actions, and hence, they should be held accountable for those actions. Individuals are seen as free to evaluate their options, weigh the pros and cons of various decisions, as well as the possible consequences, and act accordingly. The environment, if examined at all, is seen as something for the "autonomous individual" to overcome, conquer, or rise above. It is an obstacle to action. According to Skinner, the concept of the autonomous individual has permeated our society, governed institutions, provided the basis for our legal system, directed our thinking, and indeed, shaped our language (Skinner, 1971).

The autonomous individual and the origin of behavior. Both in professional literature and in lay discussions of ethical conduct, one can find individuals evoking what Skinner (1971) termed "mentalistic" constructs to explain unethical behavior. Both scholars and managers attempt to explain unethical or questionable behavior as a product of personality characteristics, character faults, or psychopathology.

From the authors' perspective, there are several dangers inherent in the use of mentalistic constructs to explain human behavior. By using labels to explain behaviors, ethicists and managers risk engaging in circular reasoning, and in so doing, inadvertently thwart the scientific study of ethical behavior. Labels provide a means of classifying individuals by type and, in that sense, facilitate communication. However, labels do not explain why a particular behavior occurred, nor do labels prevent or correct unwanted behaviors. Knowing that a worker is "dishonest," for example, does not explain the basis for the dishonest act, how to correct it, nor how to prevent it in the future.

Moreover, attributing an act to an underlying internal process, such as "character" or "personality traits," inevitably leads to speculation about the underlying psychological, moralistic, and more recently, the genetic basis for behavior. In short, there is a tendency to look inside the person and then embark on endless games of "psycho-archeology," hoping to discover the "root cause."

Although there are undoubtedly psychological and/or disease processes associated with some maladaptive behaviors, our tendency to "look inwards" for an explanation may be counterproductive. By looking for internal causes, one fails to recognize that many undesirable behaviors are not necessarily symptoms of an underlying process, but rather, may be products of an ongoing reciprocal interaction between the individual and his or her environment (Skinner, 1971) .

The autonomous individual and change. Because of their interest in the individual and their on-going search for the internal origins of behavior, social scientists have devoted a disproportionate amount of time trying to understand and change the "inner" man or woman. Because proponents of this approach attribute unethical behavior to "internal states," they are left with a limited number of solutions. These include education, training, medication, surgery, the altering of genetic structures, and in the case of failure, the threat of punishment or incarceration.

In organizational settings, two of the more popular tools for promoting ethical conduct are education and training. Organizations create programs designed to train or "sensitize" employees to potential ethical and/or legal problems. Such programs are designed to prevent sexual harassment, combat drugs in the workplace, prevent employment discrimination, promote cultural diversity, and reduce theft. Organizations warn, cajole, and preach in hopes that information alone will change behavior.

Empirical research supporting the efficacy of such efforts is sparse. Seldom do companies measure the impact of their programs on the target behaviors. If programs can demonstrate an increased awareness or a change in attitudes and beliefs, then this is considered sufficient. As a result, questions such as does ethics education or the institutionalization of an ethical code of conduct lead to a decrease in unethical behavior go unanswered. If answers to these and related questions exist, the information remains proprietary.

Organizations Ethics spend millions of dollars on training and education. According to Merger and Pipe (1984), the assumption is that education and training promote behavior change--an assumption that they find highly questionable. Individuals need directional data in order to perform tasks, but information alone may not be sufficient. To paraphrase a famous psychologist, "We all know what we should do, the problem is doing it

(Haimowitz, 1978)."

Perhaps one of the most deleterious consequences of viewing individuals as autonomous human beings is the reliance on punishment and threat of punishment as a primary means of deterring and correcting unethical behavior. When training fails, managers turn to threats. If managers cannot educate or train the autonomous individual to conform to organizational rules, procedures, and policies, then threats are used to promote compliance. But, as Skinner (1971) observed, such "urgings" are effective only if there is "some tendency to behave in a given way (p. 87)." In many instances, one threat leads to another, or to what Aubrey Daniels (1994) has dubbed the "longer, louder, meaner" phenomenon (p. 17).

Moreover, if the threat of punishment or punishment is effective, it merely stops an unethical act. It does not promote nor teach the desired behavior (Daniels, 1994). For example, the threat of a stiff fine may stop overt racial or sexual discrimination, but the threat does not promote nor teach respect and appreciation for racial, gender, and cultural differences. And, since punishment occurs after the act, the deleterious consequences to other employees, the organization, or to society, have already occurred. Punishment cannot repair the damage.

In addition, using punishment to control the "autonomous" individual may lead to unintended negative consequences. Threatened with the prospect of punishment, individuals instinctively act to avoid it (Pryor, 1985). They may lie, sneak, or cheat to escape a negative consequence. In short, one of the unintended consequences of punishment is that it prompts and reinforces other undesirable behaviors.

Punishment and threats may also prompt retaliation in the form of industrial sabotage, espionage, and the like. Murdock and Leipzig's research (1989) suggests that employees subjected to a hostile working environment were far more likely to rationalize unethical acts than individuals employed in a more humane workplace.

When education, training, threats, and punishment fail to promote or correct unethical behavior, managers can always resort to "psychological referral," or they can, in Pryor's (1985) terms, "shoot the dog," i.e., transfer or fire the employee. Psychotherapy and psychiatry are expensive and may or may not help. Transfers and firings, while providing immediate relief, may lead to other problems, including law suits and repetition of the behavior in a different environment. And, the organization must incur the costs of hiring and training replacements.

In short, the ongoing preoccupation with psychological and moralistic approaches to organizational ethics has impeded the scientific study of ethical behavior, it has hindered the development of practical data-based methodologies for solving ethical problems, and it has fostered a reliance on education, training and punishment as the primary vehicles for ensuring employee compliance.

Alternatives to the autonomous individual. Given that many current approaches rely on the "mentalistic model" of human behavior, are there viable alternatives? Fortunately, the answer is "yes." Although it is difficult to credit any single individual or body of research, a number of scholars have offered alternatives to the mentalistic model. Several names that bear mentioning include: Lewin (1947); Weiner (1954); Bertalanfy (1956); the Palo Alto School--Watzlawick, Beavins, and Jackson (1967), Watzalawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974); the Organizational Development perspective of scholars such as Schein (1969), Argyris and Schon (1976), and McGregor (1985). Despite their differences, these models have several things in common. First, they recognize that the individual is part of a larger system or culture, whether it be the workplace, the family, or society. Second, the system or culture is not a "container," rather, individuals live in multiple systems (Bullis, 1993), and are influenced by competing organizations, or what Cheney (1987) terms "corporate rhetors." Third, they recognize that various systems influence one another. Fourth, that system processes are not static, rather, organizing is an ongoing process of enactment (Weick, 1969). And finally, the works of Peters and Watterman (1982), Deming (1982), and Senge (1990), suggest that when organizations focus on creating viable cultures that enhance employee performance, they can bring about significant changes in worker productivity.

Even though their contributions are substantial, these scholars have not, for the most part, provided

managers with systematic, data-based approaches for dealing with ethical problems in the workplace. Although they have partially succeeded in shifting the view away from the individual as a causal agent in ethical and unethical acts, managers still do not have the tools they need to promote ethical behavior in an organizational setting. When confronted with unethical acts the solutions are more often than not one of the following: education, training, punishment, or the threat of punishment.

If managers and organizations are going to move beyond this paradigm, scholars need to present them with a viable alternative--one that both advances the field as a social science, and one that is compatible with and enhances organizational performance and the corporate bottom-line. The well-established and empirically supported field of Applied Behavior Analysis is one alternative. Based on the pioneering work of B.F. Skinner, and more recently individuals such as Thomas Gilbert (1983) and Aubrey Daniels (1989 ; 1994), Performance Management (PM), also known as Organizational Behavior Management, applies Behavior Analysis methodology to the workplace.

Performance Management and Ethical Behavior in the Workplace.

Behavior analysts have carefully studied the relationship between individual behavior and the environment. They have found that many seemingly inexplicable acts have their origin, not in the psyche, but in the environment. Behavior analysts have set out to empirically study the relationship between behavior and the context in which it occurs. Their goal is to establish validated relationships between antecedent conditions and behavioral responses.

PM is a systematic, data based approach to managing human behavior in the workplace. It is systematic, in that it relies on what Daniels (1994) refers to as the "laws of behavior," that is, a lawful relationship between behavior and the environment. Relationships that were initially validated in laboratory settings have been empirically observed in natural settings. PM holds that the environmental response to a behavior either increases the probability of the act being repeated (reinforcement) or it decreases the probability (punishment or extinction). When actions result in a positive outcome, the individual is likely to repeat them. When actions result in a negative outcome, the individual is likely to stop the behavior. PM contends that much of our behavior can be explained by what happens to individuals after they engage in a particular act (Daniels, 1994).

PM is based on data. It begins with direct observation and measurement of the behavior and its consequences within the context of the environment. The goal is to measure either behaviors that lead to meaningful outcomes or to measure actual accomplishments. On the basis of these observations, idiosyncratic interventions are designed and implemented using time series or multiple baseline designs to monitor progress. The objective is significant, meaningful change in the target behavior or outcome. Statistical significance is seldom seen as a viable outcome.

PM is interested in creating conditions that positively reinforce desired behavior, extinguish (not punish) undesired behaviors, and remove obstacles to positive change. It is also interested in changing environments that may unintentionally punish or discourage desired behavior or encourage undesired behaviors. For example, managers may fail to reward employees who do the right thing, and hence, extinguish a desired behavior. Alternatively, managers may inadvertently punish a desired behavior by assigning additional work to employees who finish work ahead of schedule. Or, they may punish trustworthy and competent employees with additional work. PM examines the relationship between productive and unproductive acts, and then alters the context to increase the probability of the desired behavior and decrease the probability of the undesired behavior.

Performance management: Ethical applications. PM has been remarkably successful in making meaningful changes in a number of target behaviors across a wide-range of environments. Although the majority of the studies have dealt with productivity and the related bottom-line issues, PM has also touched on topics directly related to business ethics. These include: neutralizing functional racism (McNamara, O'Connor, Ciminero, & Turner, 1977); deterring employee theft (e.g., Greenberg & Scott, 1996); decreasing tardiness and absenteeism (e.g., Durand, 1986); reducing industrial accidents and promoting safety (e.g., Sulzer-Azaroff & De Santamaria, 1980); encouraging energy and water conservation (Siero, Bakker, Dekker, & van den Burg, 1996); prompting employee conservation (O'Hara,K., Johnson, C.M., & Beehr, T.A., 1985);

encouraging recycling (Austin, Hartfied, Grindle, & Bailey, 1993); and reinforcing strategies for preserving the environment (Geller, Winett, & Everett, 1982). In each of these instances, researchers have demonstrated that they can make meaningful changes in the target behaviors using PM methodology.

Performance Management: What it can and cannot provide to the field of applied ethics. The success of PM has led to a renaissance of interest in the field. Overshadowed by a host of management fads, PM practitioners have continued to build and extend their research base. The result has been a renewed interest in PM by companies such as Kodak, 3M, Preston Trucking, and Eastman Chemical. Practitioners attribute their success to a reliance on an action base research methodology, their focus on the use of positive reinforcement rather than punishment, and a bottom-line orientation.

Although the use of PM to address ethical problems is nascent, it is a fertile field for inquiry. As Redding notes, "The preponderance of everyday problems are patently ethical or moral in nature, or they are problems in which deeply embedded ethical issues can be identified(p.18)." Ethical problems or dilemmas have behavioral consequences. Analysts can measure and monitor the behaviors leading to the unethical act, or the act, itself. By analyzing the antecedents and consequences, they can then design an intervention to correct the behavior. PM has a consistent methodological approach to tracking and solving problem behaviors. Researchers could apply the same technology to address many of the ethical problems facing organizations and businesses today.

However, PM, as it is currently practiced, has several limitations. First, although Skinner envisioned a science of behavior that was capable of helping us design and redesign cultures, including organizations, it has largely been used to address micro-level problems. Although it has been successful, practitioners have failed to take into account the pervasive role of a larger system(s), as well as competing systems. Initial positive changes in a target behavior have, in a number of instances, been followed by a return to baseline. For example, a researcher who had successfully reduced the incidence of employee theft was asked to terminate the project when the management realized the extent of the problem. Although data on such occurrences are anecdotal, the authors suspect that this phenomenon is endemic.

A related problem was noted by Bandura (1978) and echoed by MacNamara and Andrasik (1981). Bandura commented that PM ". . . tends to neglect or miss the very real and somewhat unpredictable impact that reciprocal interactions between people and their environments may pose for determining the future." Bandura's observation is particularly relevant given the rapid changes being brought on by technology, global competition, and corporate downsizing. Any approach which fails to address larger systematic issues and treats behavior within a relatively closed system or "container" has serious limitations. As Seeger observes, "The organizational context is complex, chaotic, and often illogical (p.xi). PM needs to expand its focus to address these complexities.

Finally, most applications of PM tend to be top down. Even when cultural or organizational issues are considered (e.g., see Gilbert 1978), practitioners cascade the intervention from the top-down or build parallel organizations to transfer the technology across the organization. Both strategies may ignore stakeholder input and decreases the probability of employee acceptance and support.

Conclusion

The future of Performance Management and the field of applied business ethics. PM has a demonstrated track record and can provide managers with the tools they need to address many ethical or ethically related problems. Because it offers a systematic and data- based approach to solving organizational problems, it can help to advance the field of organizational communication ethics and business ethics as social sciences.

Nevertheless, managers must still wrestle with the question of values. What is exemplary or desired performance in one context , may be something quite different in another. Managers will still have to decide on what Gilbert terms ". . . their reason for being." It is only within that framework that they can identify and classify behaviors as desired or undesired.

Furthermore, according to Zadek (1997), any approach to organizational ethics must provide managers with

"Practical mechanisms for aligning performance, ethics, and accountability (p. 1)." Several groups have initiated this process by developing independent systems for independently auditing and tracking ethical issues in workplace systems, such as Eco-management and Audit Scheme. Other organizations have created programs for quality assurance, such as ISO 9000. These efforts, if they gain in popularity, may help to reduce what the phenomena of organizations "celebrating good intentions," "rewarding noble posturing," or "awarding 'A's' for rhetoric," --practices which Entine (1996) believes are not uncommon among many of today's so-called socially responsible companies.

In addition to having practical methods of tracking and monitoring ethical conduct, organizations also need a process for correcting them. PM offers one approach, but practitioners need to develop macro-level strategies. They need to experiment with systems interventions and the design of organizational cultures that can adapt to changes in technologies, competition, and competitive trends in "real time." Rather than persisting with a "top-down" approach, Zadek (1997) believes that organizations can reduce the number of unethical acts by including stakeholders (suppliers, customers, employees, and other relevant constituents) in the decision-making process. Stakeholders can open communication channels as well as tighten feedback loops to the organization. They, in effect, can become the "eyes" and "ears" of the organization. Stakeholders can help organizations seize opportunities, make needed improvements, and provide corrective feedback.

Zadek's stakeholder perspective, combined with recent trends in ethical auditing and the results-oriented methodology of PM, offers organizations tools that can be used to address a number of important ethical concerns. Whether organizations will take advantage of these tools, however, will be determined by the bottom-line. The success of these approaches will depend on the answers to several critical questions: Are business ethics and social responsibility incompatible with corporate life, as Schwarz (1990) contends? Is the business of business just that—business, as Friedman (1998) argues? Or is Friedman's viewpoint myopic (Primeaux, 1995)?

Alternatively, are principled business practices and corporate profitability more highly correlated than what is generally recognized (Lunday 1998)? And, are the forces of globalization, technological change, and downsizing impetuses and incentives for ethical behavior as Zadek (1997) suggests? Or, will these trends spawn an unprecedented wave of unethical and illegal corporate behavior?

From a PM perspective, if ethical practices are not profitable, then efforts to use PM or other methodologies to correct ethical problems will fail. Organizations need an incentive to adopt ethical and responsible business practices. Managers need to be reinforced for their efforts. If these reinforcers are not present in the marketplace, then other vehicles must be used to make ethical and responsible behavior possible. These might include consumer activism and government incentives.

In summary, if applied business and organizational communication ethics are to advance as a social science, researchers and managers will need to eschew psychological and moralistic approaches. They will need to move beyond the notion of the autonomous individual and the concepts of responsibility and accountability. They will need to create a new science of behavior change--one that can align the need for organizational survival and growth with the ethical treatment of internal and external stakeholders. They will also have to experiment with designing cultures capable of responding to technological revolution, globalization, and competition.

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