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Can you teach ethics to students?

THE PROBLEM

Last week Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of *The Black Swan*, said: "I don't believe that ethics can be taught in class." He was speaking after the arrest of Raj Rajaratnam, the head of hedge fund Galleon Group, and two other alumni of his MBA class at Wharton. Have business schools paid enough attention to ethical questions? Or are ethics a personal matter?

THE ADVICE

THE ACADEMIC: Rakesh Khurana

Business schools have made efforts to strengthen the ethical content of their syllabus. This has been done in three ways. First is the idea that being ethical is consequential – in other words, it pays off. The trouble is there is little empirical evidence to prove this is true.
Second is to focus on virtue, building an ethical framework based on personal character and values. But the context in business will always vary, and the temptation for students will be to rationalise their individual behaviour.
Third is the "deontological" approach, which looks at abstract concepts such as justice and duty. But these are ideas more usually associated with dos and don'ts, and cannot easily deal with complexity and ambiguity.
The real danger with business education ethics are the "hidden" ethics embedded in the curriculum, which too often lead to a narrow and mechanistic world view.
Students often arrive with a broad view of business but leave thinking mainly about maximising shareholder value. They are socially intelligent and skilled. If you introduce ethics classes they often know the "right" answer. The challenge for business schools is to develop a group of people who are self-governing and capable of critical thinking. The only alternative may be a highly regulated environment.

The writer is professor of leadership development at Harvard Business School

THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Kai Peters

Can ethics be taught? Yes it can, and yes it should. The whole purpose of education is to help individuals develop their judgment. Judgment is about making decisions among choices and ethics, at the basis level, is about making choices. Some of these choices are easier than others but few choices are easy. Most are complex. Is one Aristotelian, and a judge of a person's inherent character, or does one favour Locke evoking absolute, natural rights? Is one an egoist to maximise individual good, a hedonist seeking to maximise general pleasure, or a utilitarian who calculates the greatest happiness for the greatest number?
Managers make decisions that affect many others in their own organisations, and in many countries around the world. There is no simple basis on which these decisions are based, nor is there one specific

set of rules on which everyone can agree. It is only through dialogue that business schools can help students think these issues through. A discussion of ethics will never make the seven sins disappear. What teaching ethics can do is to make as many people as possible make as thoughtful decisions as possible.

The writer is chief executive of Ashridge Business School

THE DEAN: Roger Martin

Anything we know can be taught but nothing can be learned without desire. Therein lies the business school dilemma. The academic world knows plenty about ethics and it is eminently teachable in a class. But the magnitude of habit change following any course will be a function of the desire to learn. I believe that to enhance this desire, the greatest leverage for business schools lies in altering the fundamental premise underlying important MBA courses.
As long as we teach that human beings are rational, profit-maximising creatures, we will send students the message that personal profit-maximisation is a legitimate life goal. And for some, pursuit of that goal will extend to crossing ethical boundaries if they can get away with it.
The underlying premise of our courses must be that our world would be a miserable place if we didn't have important socially constructed laws, regulations and norms that constrain and guide our behaviour. And as a graduate, their job isn't personal profit-maximisation but rather contribution to that indispensible civil foundation through their business career.

The writer is Dean of the Rotman School of Management

THE ETHICS PROFESSOR: James O'Toole

Ethics certainly can be taught – most business schools offer such courses – but the real question is: "Can ethical behaviour be learned in the classroom?" Alas, the track record of required ethics courses is abysmal: most students see such classes as routine obstacles they must overcome – or painful *rites de passage* they must endure – on the road to earning their MBA degrees; hence, they fail to engage seriously with the material. This is particularly true when courses are taught by professors who lack business experience.
Yet, when discipline-based professors integrate ethical considerations into their courses, experience suggests students come to view ethical questions as necessary and integral components of effective decision-making. Thus, when ethics is taught in almost every course as part and parcel of good business practice, students may learn to become virtuous professionals. The problem is that too few business professors see examining the ethical implications of their disciplines as part of their job, or are comfortable dealing with the broader, long-term, and indirect consequences of applying the narrow techniques they teach.

The writer is professor of business ethics at Denver University's Daniels College of Business