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Back to Basics: Reviving Ethical Practice in Library Management

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Abstract

This paper examines the last twenty years of literature on the subject of organizational ethics. It reflects on the cultural tide and reasserts the need for establishing core values as a basis for management practice. It concludes with steps towards achieving a viable organization.

Introduction

We live in an increasingly competitive environment, striving to retain viability. Viability in today's society ultimately focuses on dollars and cents. Viability is defined as the ability "to take root and grow" or "workable and likely to survive or to have real meaning" (Webster's). Its multifaceted nature has been narrowly redefined in large measure to mean monetary gain at any cost. This narrow focus has created a dynamic in the workplace that fosters an unhealthy work environment. The challenge today is to create a responsive, positive working environment, staffed with competent, dedicated employees in a money-driven society.

This is not to suggest that profit-driven entities and healthy work environments are mutually exclusive. These workplace challenges exist regardless of the industry. Whether operating in an academic, corporate, or public environment, profit or non-profit, libraries are not immune to this societal malaise.

Libraries fall into the service industry category, driven by consumer demands, with the overarching goal of providing the masses with access to information. Service industries, by their very nature, tend to be externally oriented, focused on providing a set of services to meet the needs of its consumers, often at the expense of cultivating a positive internal working environment. This lack of stewardship is one of the many

factors contributing to the widespread discontent expressed by both employers and employees. The shift in attitudes, the decline in personal accountability, bottom-line management practices, rapid technological advances, and the resulting expectation of immediate gratification by our clientele has created a tension in the workplace that takes on a variety of manifestations.

Rising consumer expectations juxtaposed with institutions downsizing as a result of dwindling financial support, creates an even greater need for management practices to be based on sound ethical principles to avoid compromising the success of an institution/organization.

A review of ethics literature with an analysis of the impact of ethical practice on organizational health leads to the premise that a heavy reliance on ethics is the path to achieving viability in its richest sense.

Background

The business literature in the last fifteen to twenty years reflects a renewal of interest in ethics in the workplace and psychological studies on employee motivation support this as well. The 1980's was a decade of excesses. Government officials, chief executive officers, entrepreneurs and other well-positioned individuals, took advantage of a globally rapid economic growth period and created a new set of game rules by which to play. Whether in the United States or abroad, these public figures flaunted their wealth and naive citizens, steeped in either the American dream, or simply struck by that seemingly "all-powerful" greenback, regarded these individuals as role models (Milton-Smith, 1995).

The cyclical forces of nature, however, thrust these nouvelle-riche demigods into a downward spiral evidenced by the 1987 stock market crash, the junk bond scandal, the exile of the Marcos, and a variety of other headline news-making events. Former demigods transformed overnight into unethical beasts.

The result was a resurgence of interest in ethics and ethical behavior as evidenced by the business literature and the criticism levied at ethics education, but the tide has turned yet again in the last two decades with little evidence of a renewed interest in addressing these issues. Today recent company bankruptcies, government officials' involvement in power mongering, and upper management lining personal coffers with little or no regard for the impact on employees has demonstrated that this focus on ethics was indeed short-lived. In higher education, we are seeing a decline in quality and a rise in quantitative measures while libraries continue to compete with law enforcement and parks and recreation for dollars to support services provided.

One of the factors that contribute to the mainstreaming of unethical practices is the lack of ethics reinforcement. Liberal arts education has failed to make ethics education a general education requirement. Ethics education has been discipline-based, limited predominantly to law, business, medicine, and theology. Criticism has been levied at ethics education courses in these fields as closer scrutiny revealed that students were unable to apply general ethical principles to situations that fell outside the range of issues presented in the classroom (Badaracco, 1995). Ethics education, in its prescriptiveness, failed to instruct individuals of the guiding principles that have universal application. It is little wonder that organizations have fallen prey to the cultural tide that has prevailed for quite some time now. Organizations are a microcosm of a larger cosmos.

Covey captures this cultural climate in his definition of evolutionary ethics. Covey noted that "...shortly after World War I the basic view of success shifted from the Character Ethic to what we might call the Personality Ethic. Success became more a function of personality, of public image, of attitudes and behaviors, skills and techniques, that lubricate the process of human interaction." (Covey, 1989, 19).

There is nothing in this statement that appears inherently unethical, but as Covey explains, " ...parts of the personality approach were clearly manipulative, even deceptive, encouraging people to use techniques to get other people to like them, or to fake interest in the hobbies of others to get what they wanted, or to use the "power look" to intimidate their way through life." (Covey, 1989, 19). Some of the "self-help" literature fosters this definition of the personality ethic and emphasizes learning to play the game, getting your own way through manipulation, and taking a self-centered approach to life. This attitude is pervasive and is reinforced in the media, making identification of ethical practice more difficult for individuals.

So what is ethics and why should it play a central role in organizational management? For the purposes of providing a contextual reference, ethics is defined as "...the science or doctrine of the sources, principles, sanctions and ideals of human conduct and character;..." (Funk & Wagnall). At a conference, Wengert, who led a discussion on ethics, provided a qualifying definition by stating what it is not. Ethics is not "(1) Whatever religious authorities say; (2) Whatever legal authorities say, or (3) Whatever public opinion is" (Wengert, 1991, 115).

Ethical considerations involve an understanding of principles. Ethical, principle-based practices are based on the idea that there are laws of nature which are "... fundamental truths that have universal application" (Covey, 1989, 35). Principles are often confused with practices. Principles are guidelines for conduct that have endured the test of time and have redeeming value. Not all values are principle-based. Practices are activity-based, dealing with situations (Covey, 1989). Application of sound

principles leads to sound practices. Some familiar principles of the character ethic are integrity, justice, honesty, industry, and humility.

Ethical considerations are no stranger to the field of library and information science. In 1994, the American Library Association revised the 1985 ALA Code of Ethics reinforcing our ethical commitment to those we serve with particular attention to privacy, intellectual freedom, access, and service fees. More recently, the Patriot Act marshaled librarians into action. Additionally, the American Library Association devised a Statement of Professional Ethics in 1981. This statement provides a broadly-defined standard of conduct for librarians. Although it deals with several aspects of library work, it does not constitute a personnel code.

The library literature on ethics has been predominantly focused on client-based services with scant attention given to organizational dynamics. Kathleen Heim's article on personnel-related concerns in librarianship asserts that there is an "...ethical dilemma of personnel issues relating to librarianship..." because of contradictory societal values. She asserts, based on a study she jointly conducted, that years ago individuals entering the field were more concerned with providing a meaningful service than in material concerns like salary and benefits. She attributes the historically depressed salaries to this orientation. Heim further assigns responsibility to the societal climatic changes for the diminishing pool of individuals with a service orientation. Materialism is cited as the main reason for the declining interest in librarianship as a career (Heim, 1991).

Attributing a shift from a service orientation to a more materialistic orientation as the basis for creating a "basic ethical dilemma of personnel issues" makes some bold assumptions. Some analysis is required as a basis for illustrating the confusion that exists about ethical considerations. Heim's statement assumes that earning a decent wage and being service-oriented are mutually exclusive. Attributing a preoccupation with monetary concerns as the basis for the shrinking pool of "like-minded" individuals entering the field implies that a person who wishes to be paid comparable wages to that of other service-based industries lacks a service orientation. Politely stated, this a specious argument and a disservice to the profession. The depressed salaries is the result of librarianship historically being a female-dominated profession, with women in the field still earning significantly less than their male counterparts. Interestingly, this gender-based salary differential is not limited to the library profession. Salary data available for other professions underscores that women are paid less regardless of profession. If Heim had cited an ethical dilemma of personnel issues in the context of disparate pay based on gender or corrupt practices to line our pockets, she would have a reasonable argument. A personal observation is that libraries historically have failed to market their skills and to establish a high profile. It

poses the question for Heim what she considers the relative worth of the profession to that of other professions.

Heim's viewpoint is a good illustration of how values and principles are often defined as being one and the same. Principles are not values. There is no ethical dilemma resulting from "conflicting" value systems if ethical management is principle-based. The difficulty of practicing principle-based ethics is the lack of identification that occurs as certain unethical behaviors become mainstream practices and personal values take precedence over values with universal applicability. The tendency is for individuals to identify unethical practices only when it affects them personally (Bellamy, 1994).

Two distinctive examples of companies that have restructured their organizations based on ethical principles are First Direct, a telephone bank, and Mercury One-2-One, a cellular phone specialist. Both organizations are considered "successful innovators" in people management and customer service.

Their individual successes are attributed to an ethical approach to achieving a sense of mutual commitment amongst employer and employee. Applying the principles of human dignity, honesty, nurturance, fairness, honesty, and integrity, First Direct has created guidelines for human conduct with enduring value. This has translated into employees feeling valued and it has been a motivator in doing the job well. The term "loyalty" was replaced with the term "commitment" due to the recognition that "jobs for life" are a thing of the past. Newman, the chief executive, has determined that "so called soft issues are the most crucial issues of all, and that their personal leadership in this respect is crucial to business success" (MacLachlan, 1995).

Richard Goswell of Mercury One-2-One shares this orientation. He maintains that the staff identify with how they are treated as individuals and the degree of empowerment they have (MacLachlan, 1995). First Direct looked at the quality of their service. In defining service, Newman looked at "hygiene factors: aspects that any organization could copy and then they considered the motivational aspects, those soft issues that distinguish the service from other services. Identifying these motivations led to the conclusion that the "...long-term assets are its [the company's] people and the culture in which they operate" (MacLachlan, 1995). Shared values form the culture. Goswell defines values as "guiding principles" (MacLachlan, 1995, 20-1). Both Newman & Goswell were reluctant to advertise the determined core values of their respective companies not for competitive reasons, but due to a philosophy that written values lose their vitality. It is akin to the vision and mission statements that wind up in the manual, but are seldom exercised. Goswell, however, did share five of the core values for illustrative purposes (MacLachlan, 1995).

The five core values are:

- *Empowerment and Support for High Expectations*
  Essentially, the premise behind this is that individuals are empowered to set high self-expectations, which in turn are supported by the employer by pushing "decisions to the best possible level of the organization for that decision to be effective."
- *People as Individuals*
  Respect for colleagues, customers, and vendors is an absolute. Business is all about people and the relationships formed in business, family, and society.
- *Families and Communities*
  Supporting the growth of family and community is important to business, important to the individuals in the organization, and important in the societal context.
- *Straightforward and Better*
  Business changes must be kept simple and improve efficiency and the cost base to meet consumer expectations and needs.
- *Ambassadors for Communication*
  Communication between people is the "lifeblood" of the business, so excellent communication is essential.

To achieve a healthy, working environment, requires a commitment on the part of all employees, management and staff alike. A paradigm of collective consciousness is required. To achieve this paradigm shift requires continued involvement and awareness.

There exist a great number of buzzwords in the business literature that evoke the opposite of the intended effect. Principle-based management is simply good, commonsense, that has the ability to transform dysfunctional organizations into viable organizations.

In discussing organizational dynamics, keep in mind the following assumptions: Each of us is a part that forms the whole; each of us affects and influences one another through our behaviors and actions. Universal principles exist that create the relationship of cause and effect. Alignment with these principles leads to organizational health.

Research in quantum physics supports the view that the universe is intelligent, and humans should align themselves with an understanding that there is a universal principle of design and control that we form a part of and should strive to understand and adopt. Our ability to reason provides us with the necessary tools to consciously emanate the universal truths known as principles or the laws of nature. "To the extent

that we collectively agree on "how things are external to us, we call this consensual reality" (Casteneda, 1972). "...if we choose to ignore these laws [principles] in favour of our own self-preoccupied designs, we will reap the disintegration of the forms around us" (Banner, 1995, 33) "Conflicts come from a false ego identity produced by self-centered assumptions of separateness, the need for manipulation and a consequent lack of trust in life" (Banner, 1995, 33).

According to Maehr, achieving organizational commitment "at all levels...is the *sine qua non* of any effective organization" (1989, 4). To achieve commitment requires an exploration of the factors that inhibit this outcome.

Unethical Work Environment-Some Causes

The number one factor attributed to job dissatisfaction is the poor psychological health of the organizational climate (Hopper 1991; Samuels, 1982). Maehr asserts that the leadership of the organization is pivotal in affecting the cultural climate of an organization. In the library environment, "library employees perceive inadequate management as one of the major sources of job stress" (Hopper 1991, 53). Ambiguous job or performance expectations, conflicting work expectations, inaccessible supervisors, non-involvement in decision-making in areas of expertise, and poor communication channels were some of the main contributors to low morale (Bunge 1989; Hopper 1991).

These factors are not unique to libraries. In addition to these elements, inconsistent and unfair practices, lack of due process, self-promoting behaviors, controlling and power-based management practices, and not recognizing employees as individuals were widely cited in the library and business literature as key contributors leading to unhealthy and in the long-term, unsuccessful, non-viable organizations. This dissatisfaction results in a decline in institutional loyalty.

An article in Industry Week cites managers as valuing highly a "management structure that cares about all stakeholders (including employees), a leadership that takes a long-term view in its operations, and an organization that strongly values growth and development of individual" (Moskal, 1993, 23).

Moskal draws from a five-page workplace values survey, which asked individuals to explore personal values versus their perception of the employer's values. Three categories were covered: "organizational culture, management style, and the way the individual is treated or expected to act within the organization." Organizations were viewed as placing more value on the short-term and employees expressed a preference for the long term. Management style revealed a major difference in perception. Employees valued "motivation techniques based on caring," not the common practice

of motivating through fear. "In fact, respondents and their employers are at arm's length over the issue, and it may erode worker productivity, trust and loyalty, and the intangibles of a positive work life" (1994, 23).

Rubin (1991) illustrates how administrators and supervisors play an enormous role in the organizational health of an institution. It is commonly perceived that information is power. The more reliable and timely information is disseminated, the greater likelihood for individuals to make informed decisions. When administrators withhold or misrepresent information or disseminate false or misleading information about an employee to other employees, they have committed an ethical breach that undermines the health of the entire organization.

Cullen, Victor, and Stephens (1989) and Clinard and Yeager (1980) concur. They purport that the organizational culture creates a climate that shapes individual behavior. When pressure exists on achieving organizational interests and managers do not model ethical practices, the result may be ethical ambivalence. When this occurs, the means individuals choose to achieve organizational goals may create ethical conflicts.

Some obvious outcomes are low morale, distrust, modeling unethical behavior as a practice, and each of these leads to further disintegration of a viable organization. In other words, the interactivity of individuals plays a vital part in creating an organizational culture. Simply articulating expectations doesn't suffice.

Rubin (1991) provides a good analysis of guiding principles in the library field, acknowledging that competing demands often give rise to ethical issues. These guiding principles are: Survival, social utility, social responsibility, and individuality. Central to any organization is its ability to sustain itself. Management theory is built around this survival principle. The manager's role is to run an efficient and effective organization to ensure its survival. Where managers often fall short is in their understanding of the individuality principle, which recognizes the importance of each individual amongst all the individuals that make up an organization. Managers often rely on individuals to fulfill specific job functions to accomplish tasks, viewing employees as a means to an end rather than viewing and consequently treating individuals as valuable assets in and of themselves.

Social utility and social responsibility are different, but to my mind related. Rubin defines social utility in terms of the good that libraries perform by contributing "to the educational, cultural, and recreational well-being of the community" (1991, 4). The social responsibility role of the library organization is defined in terms of advancing "the broad goals of the society" (1991,4). An example he provides to underscore this responsibility is the provision of equal employment opportunities through affirmative

action. Taking Rubin's idea a step further, ethical management practices in organizations promotes social awareness that transcends the workplace. If organizations operated on the basis of sound ethical principles, individuals in their day-to-day interactions within and outside the organization would be modeling the practices that result from principle-based conduct.

Another contributor to an unethical workplace is a lack of awareness and ability to identify ethical breaches. Bellamy (1994) asserts that individuals often do not recognize that situations that arise in the workplace fall into the realm of ethics, and therefore may make an unethical choice. He contends that ethics training often falls short, failing to address "the ethical dimensions of decision-making" (Bellamy, 1994, 11). Bellamy has developed an umbrella metaphor that he utilizes when conducting ethics training in the workplace.

Developing an Ethical Framework

The spokes of Bellamy's umbrella symbolize values that promote sound practice. This is a brief synopsis of a more detailed explanation provided in his article.

Umbrella Metaphor

- *Personal Responsibility* – To be shielded by ethical practice, you have to be under or holding the umbrella. It is the collective *us* that holds the umbrella.
- *Strength* – The umbrella's strength reflects character strengths. Lightweight ethics don't stand up to bad conditions.
- *Integrity* – All the elements of the umbrella must be strong and balanced to function well. Ethical character requires a balance of virtues and "encourages us to lead an integrated, ethical life."
- *Inclusiveness* – The ethical umbrella encourages us to consider the impact of our actions on others.
- *Clarity* – When situations are placed under the ethical umbrella, issues gain clarity and appropriate decisions are made.
- *Protection* – The ethical umbrella protects all who are under it.
- *Timeliness* – The ethical umbrella should be available when a need is anticipated or an actual need exists.
- *Enabling* – The ethical umbrella is a cooperative function allowing everyone to prosper.
- *Styles* – Ethical umbrellas may be stylistically different, but the shape and the function are the same.
- *Action* – The ethical umbrella only works if you use it.
- *Singularity* – One ethical umbrella should be used both in the workplace and in private life (Bellamy, 1994).

A healthy organization requires the practice of truthful and complete information, fairness and consistency, and decisions that promote the greater good. This can be achieved through organizational change and yes, top-down involvement is essential. Involvement communicates a commitment to changing the working environment. If management does not fully embrace proposed changes, organizational hypocrisy is the outcome, which breeds widespread hostility, less effective employees, and turnover. This is a high price to pay and is counterintuitive to a healthy, productive organization. And yet, it regularly happens. According to summaries from Gallup polls, loss of an employee can cost up to six months-worth of salary to replace. Employees who remain with a poor supervisor rarely go the extra mile for their employer. Gallup found poorly managed workgroups are an average of 50% less productive and 44% less profitable than well managed groups (Harter, 2002).

Conclusion - Actual Steps Toward Building an Ethical Workplace

To create a viable organization is it is crucial to implement principle-based practices. The prevailing mantra throughout the literature on this subject is that the success of an organization requires a highly engaged and committed administration or management. A healthy organization recognizes that ethical integrity and good faith is an organization-wide ongoing commitment. The key role of management is to model and practice ethical leadership. Bellamy's umbrella metaphor provides an ethical framework for carrying out essential steps for organizations that are committed to sustained viability in changing times.

Reynierse (1994) refers to these steps as the ten commandments, which succinctly captures the key elements repeatedly expressed in the literature on the subject.

- *Implement an Ethical Framework*
  Use the Bellamy Umbrella or find another ethical tool. Be sure to share this with all employees.
- *Strategy*
  Developing a strategic plan is an important step that establishes a contextual framework (mission and goals).
- *Management/Administrator Involvement*
  The strategic plan cannot be highly effective without top-down involvement and support. If the upper management or administration does not promote the strategy, start at the supervisor level, but do not expect the outcome to be as successful.
- *Assessment*
  Organizational assessment is important. Do your own Gallup poll to determine the biggest issues at your organization. Reynierse and Harker conducted an organizational dynamic survey that helped determine the values of the

organization. (Reynierse, 1994). Surveys that involve the staff are crucial. This illuminates the culture of the organization and serves as an indicator of what areas need attention.

- *Core values clarification*.
Clarify core values. Engage all the staff to ensure a common understanding. What defines the organization? What does the organization symbolize? No more than three to five key core values should be identified. More than five values prevents the organization from focusing in and making these values attainable.

- *Leadership*.
Steps need to be taken to promote these values. Creating a culture takes leadership, participation and communication. The sooner upper management engages staff at the operating levels the better. This practice allows management to reinforce values regularly and consistently. Managers need to be visible and interested. Make a regular habit of walking around and getting to know employees and talk with them. Creating transparency is integral to continuing engagement, fostering widespread responsibility and accountability. Realize that leadership is no longer the sole purview of administrators. Thinking and acting in the best interest of the organization is the responsibility of every employee in the library, but the administration needs to be supportive to foster this behavior.

- *Widespread Participation and Communication.*
Allow your coworkers and employees to participate and express opinions early and often. An organizational survey is a good first step in learning the views of the employees. Involve your employees in problem-solving and coming up with solutions. Supervisors/managers need to pay attention to employees, recognize their expectations and respond with genuine interest to concerns that are expressed. Frequent formal and informal communication with all employees is integral to achieving core values. Conduct kick-off meetings to reinforce core values.

- *Budget.*
The operating budget shouldn't be a secret. Employees need to understand the financial framework within which they work. Creating a financial focus leads to a better understanding of what is feasible leading to more thoughtful participation.

- *Training*.
Do not overlook the need to provide training whenever necessary. Training is often the most overlooked option to keeping your workforce up to speed. It is often seen as a time consumer and financial drain, but time and money invested in your staff pays multiple dividends since well-trained staff are generally more

confident armed with a skill set and are more likely to work efficiently as a result.

- *Recognition*.

Managers and supervisors must model the values if any success is to occur. Coaching is important. Be sure to provide personal recognition for efforts individuals make toward organizational good. Appreciation is proven to build support. Studies support that leadership through encouragement builds support and fear-based management doesn't motivate employees to approach their jobs with enthusiasm and integrity. Link formal and informal recognition to core values.

Ethical codes, principles, rules, and, communications have little influence on organizational viability. It is the attitudes and behaviors of the individuals within an organization that make the difference. Ethical leadership requires building relationships around shared goals, values, and learning. It is a commitment that is ongoing and requires full engagement from all organizational members to succeed.

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Back to Contents

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