Ethics in the workplace:

Nick Parish on Ethics in the workplace

Nick Parish, industrial chaplain in Bracknell for several years and ordained for 17 years, lead a Reading@Work seminar on looking at the theory, toolkit and practical examples of ethics in the workplace on 6 May 2004.

Introduction

Tonight's greatest asset is your experience.

What is ethics?

The Moral Principles and values tat govern the actions and decisions of an individual or group.

Based on our faith?

What is business ethics?

Business ethics a subset of ethics.

Pathfinder for Business Ethics (USA) states that business ethics is the 'High standards of corporate and business behaviour followed to secure the social responsibility of commerce and industry.'

Alternatively, in layman's terminology of Steve Hall, US businessman who sells self-assembly sheds, 'Knowing what is right and having the will to do it.'

Note that there are two parts to this – knowing what is right, our head knowledge, and having the will to do it, our heart knowledge.

Ethics – Theoretical background

Ethical theory falls under two categories:

1. Universal - applies to all situations, and may have the form of corporate and social codes for example;

2. Relative - applies to particular situations Individual and personal etc.

Take an easy example, personal calls at work - never, under the universal theory, or when severe illness of a relative, then all right under the relative theory, or when what? How do we determine that divide?

Classical schools of ethical thought

There are two Classical ethical schools of thought:

1. Utilitarianism (Mill) - ethical decisions are based on the consequence of the action; or

2. Deontological (Kantism) - ethical decisions should arise from our moral duty.

Dimension of business ethics

There are three levels on which business ethics can be examined in the business context:

1. Personal-Individual;

2. Corporate-Organisational;

3. Global-Multinational.

Say, for example, that you work for X Ltd, a global company, then applying these three levels may mean, in practice:

1. Who do we react when our manager shouts at our colleagues when they make an error, all working for X Ltd?

2. How do we feel about how X Ltd's policies as a company and the way that they operate and treat their staff?

3. How do we feel about how X Ltd behaves in other parts of the world – say in the developing world, for example?

Perhaps most unsettling for us to consider, where does my responsibility begin and end on that scale of 1 to 3?

Nick suggested the application of a gearbox analogy to answering this question – we cannot go in at 'top gear' global board level if we have not done sufficient time in the organisation, but a change can be made through there being a body of Christ in the organisation.

Quaker viewpoint on involvement

Nick drew attention to Quaker writings on involvement in the business ethics, referring to their three levels:

1. the morality of the system (profit, the market, funding, environment etc);

2. the Corporate policies (employment, trading, investments etc.);

3. the behaviour of individuals at all levels.

(This has interesting parallels to other Reading@Work seminars, see here for example.)

Supporting Christian at Work

Nick drew attention to Mark Greene's essay, 'Supporting Christians at work,' which outlines cultural and institutional reasons as to why is it so tough to present your Christian values at work. Mark identified five values of the contemporary workplace that work against the Christian ethical code being applied in its fullness in the workplace:

1. **Practical Atheism**

Colleagues do not wish to become involved in religious issues, and nor does the organisation as a whole. Christian groups are mini-churches that are offline to what is mainly going on at work, and organisations deny God's existence. For example, an approved email to 3,000 staff regarded a carol service created two complaints from members of staff objecting to the email being sent – they were not practicing of another religious tradition;

2. **People = Functions**

Value to the organisation is what you do and not who you are;

3. **Individualism**

People do what is best for them and not what is best to do in the situation;

4. **Materialism/consumerism**

People try to get the most they can from work in terms of money and benefits, regardless of the overall cost;

5. **Work=Worth**

The classic second question on meeting someone: 'What do you do?' and the implicit value statement from what people say they do - even 'I am just a cleaner' or 'I am just a housewife'.

Our Christian teaching is against all these five statements.

Christian ethical business values

Quaker writing on the subject in the essay 'Good Business: Ethics at work' has 4 testimonies of core business values:

a. Honesty and integrity,

b. Simplicity,

c. Equality, and

d. Peace.

There are often simple solutions to what we are querying – for example, the need to treat all people the same in terms of their value.

Toolkit

Nick helpfully outlined the toolkit we have available for considering business ethical issues:

a. Bible,

b. Church tradition and teaching, theology,

  c. **Prayer, guidance,**

  d. **Holy Spirit,**

  e. **Fellowship,**

  f. **Books,**

  g. **Internet, and**

  h. **Christian media.**

But need to be careful with books where seeking to use a spanner to solve the issue where in fact require a screwdriver.

The seminar then considered who do we pray for in our intercessions versus how many Christian workers are there in industry?

Testimonies

Personal stories were shared. If you have one you would like to share, please let us know and we can add it to your [testimony page](#).

Conclusion

Nick and the meeting concluded that integrity is the bottom line.

We inherently know where the line is and the problem comes when others dictate where the line in the sand should be drawn in a given workplace example.

Making a Christ-like stand does earn respect.

We should compliment those who do things well, regardless of whether they are a Christian or not.