

Can we train MBAs to do the 'right' thing?

The ethical aspects of business education

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The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. —Martin Luther King Jr

THE QUESTION IS whether present-day business schools are manufacturing managers programmed to make better business decisions or are they trained to view their decisions from an ethical lens as well? Does the course curriculum of business schools highlight doing right things and cultivating the habit of ethical awareness among students? Ethics act as guideposts to students—the future business managers—to make decisions that make good business sense.

Ethics, sometimes known as moral philosophy, is an abstract subject and is filled with grey areas. Different people interpret ethics differently, at times in a manner that suits them. In general, ethics addresses questions such as: How shall we conduct ourselves? What's right and what's wrong? How can we measure goodness and badness? Are some things always wrong or does it depend on the view or situation?

From a business school perspective, ethics is the study of moral values and judgments as they apply to students pursuing higher education. It is about learning to spot and think through ethical dilemmas through the eyes of others. Plato, the great Greek philosopher, said, "But if you ask what is the good of education in general. The answer is easy that education makes good men, and that good men act nobly." Ethical mindset instils a sense of responsibility and transforms students into good human beings.

The dilemma is, business schools stress too much on imparting conceptual knowledge (learn to know) as well as how to apply knowledge in real life setting (learn to do). But do little to prepare students on ethical aspects of life (learn to be-value system). Responses like "Everyone does it, if I don't, I am left in the dust"; "Good guys finish last"; "I

did it under peer pressure" are common among students. Further, students are often made to believe that, in business world, all that matters is hitting the numbers. This pressure to produce numbers injects a kind of aggression in a student's DNA, and his/her mindset is steered to think that to succeed in a hyper-competitive and fast-paced market place, embracing a give-and-take policy works. From this pressure comes temptation, and the resultant unethical behaviour. So, what is it that leads to indifference towards ethical conduct? In my opinion, changing student career objectives, cost-benefit approach to education, changing focus of course curriculum, and environment at business school campuses are factors bringing ethical indiscipline among students.

In fact, higher education in general is becoming less academic and more businesslike. Business schools charge high fees and view students as consumers of education. Students, in turn, tend to perceive unfair and unethical behaviour as acceptable.

Course curriculum is being designed with undue focus on practical aspects—not to say it is not required—but courses that encourage deeper understanding of humans have been dwindling. In addition, the fast pace of academic and extracurricular activities at campuses does not give students sufficient time for reflection and contemplation.

Experts wonder if business schools are really developing students to be good human beings or merely producing sophisticated operators, labelled as future managers, who lack understanding of themselves and direction in life. They believe new generations of business professionals need ethical thinking to develop better solutions for handling corporate dilemmas. And the right time to sow the seeds of ethical attitude among students is during their sojourn at campuses. Studying importance of ethics within business, both in theory and practice, will enable students to learn about real-world challenges business professionals face. Samuel Johnson aptly stated that integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.

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