Ethics

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The topic of ethics is one that often seems to ignite a great deal of controversy in every venue where I've seen it come up. In many cases, such as high technology companies where I worked or businesses to whom I consult, a discussion of ethics often is equated as a personal attack on members of the organization.

Ethics, in the most common sense, is considered to be that behavior which is morally accepted as "good" and "right." The problem with ethics is that it isn't always all that simple. One person's version of what is good and right isn't always the same as another's. Broadly speaking, there are four canonical ways of viewing ethical behavior: Utilitarian, Individualism, Moral-Rights, and Justice. For the utilitarian, the need to shut down a factory in one town so that the factories in the next three towns can stay open may be a perfectly good and right decision. However, someone more individually focused might equally reasonably disagree. Some companies will lay off some employees on the grounds that it's a necessary evil to preserve the jobs of the rest; Tom Watson, the founder of IBM, regarded such behavior as unethical. Despite pressure from investors, he refused to lay off employees even during the Great Depression.

More generally, ethics is a tool to educate both the members of an organization and non-members alike. Members are told the behavioral expectations involved in being part of the organization. This is particularly important in organizations where there are new members constantly entering the group. Without this education, members unwittingly may act contrary to the norms and desires of the group, or unscrupulous group members may take advantage of the ignorance of younger group members. Because so much of learning ethical behavior in a group involves modeling established members, it is particularly important that those members live up to the principles espoused by the organization, and that the organization enforce, visibly when necessary, the appropriate behavior.

Non-members, on the other hand, learn what behavior to expect from members of the group. In a sense, the code of ethics of a group can also be considered its list of qualifications. The ethics code of the American Psychological Association (APA) states the expected skills and qualifications of a therapist. By doing so, it educates the public as to what it believes to be the necessary qualifications of a therapist. While someone might disagree, at least they are making an informed choice.

When a person sees a purported member of an organization behaving in a way that does not match the stated ethics of an organization, that may be a clue that the person claiming membership is not, in reality, a member of the organization, or is acting without the organizations' knowledge or approval. Without the knowledge of what the organization considers ethical, an observer might otherwise condemn the entire organization based on the actions of one or a few individuals.

Ultimately, organizational ethics define the range of accepted and acceptable behaviors within an organization. To be effective, the commitment to live up to them must be made throughout the organization.

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