Elevating the Dialogue on Professional Ethics to the Next Level: Reflections on the Experience of the Academy of Management

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ABSTRACT This commentary reflects on the Academy of Management’s experience since developing a formal code of ethics to guide the professional behaviour of its members over twenty years ago. Despite widespread efforts to publicize the Code within the Academy, a sizeable proportion of Academy members are unaware it exists and only a very small proportion have read it carefully. Current efforts underway to increase ethics awareness are described. In addition, it is suggested that the discussion of ethical principles needs to move beyond a printed document and annual workshops to become more influential in the day-to-day lives of management professors. Suggestions for how this might be accomplished by the Academy of Management and other similar associations with codes of ethics (e.g., IACMR) are discussed.

KEYWORDS Academy of Management, ethics, ethics training, management doctoral programs, professional associations

INTRODUCTION

In December 1990 I published my final commentary as Editor of the Academy of Management Journal (AMJ). I observed that editorial statements and doctoral dissertations shared something in common: ‘They take considerable time and thought to prepare, are not widely read as a rule, and have limited utility beyond the immediate context in which they are offered’ (Mowday, 1990: 657). I used the occasion of my final commentary, in part, to introduce and publicize the newly created Code of Ethics of the Academy of Management. The new Code was approved by the Board of Governors of the Academy in April 1990 and has undergone several revisions in the intervening years. Annually publishing the Code of Ethics in the December issue of AMJ became a tradition followed by subsequent editors, with a few exceptions. Even though the Code has been published annually, I did not anticipate the Code would have the same characteristics that I observed were shared by editorial statements and doctoral dissertations. An ethics awareness survey conducted in 2008
revealed that 25 percent of the members surveyed didn’t even know the Academy had a Code of Ethics, about the same percentage who reported ‘I’ve spent a little time on it’ (only 8 percent of those surveyed said they had read the Code thoroughly). My goal of publicizing the Academy’s Code of Ethics by publishing it in AMJ appears, in retrospect, not to have been a great success.

Even so, the adoption of a Code of Ethics by the Academy of Management over twenty years ago was a milestone for the organization and one that sets it apart from some of our academic colleagues in the business school. For example, at the 2011 meeting of the American Finance Association, a panel discussion considered whether the association should even have a code of ethics. Other organizations, such as the International Association of Chinese Management Research (IACMR), have been influenced by the Academy of Management to develop their own code of ethics called the Commitment to Excellence, also published annually in the association’s Management and Organization Review (MOR). In the comments that follow, I will focus primarily on the Academy of Management and its experience with a code of ethics. However, it should be noted that my thoughts might apply equally to other professional organizations, such as the IACMR. My general point is that simply publishing a Code of Ethics, while perhaps preferable to having no code, may not be enough. Rather, activities have to be undertaken to make the code a living document and become part of the day-to-day lives of the association’s members.

Although the Academy has taken a leadership role with respect to codes of ethics in business education, it appears that the association still has a long way to go in making the code a vital and influential document for the organization’s members. In that regard, progress is being made. For many years the Academy of Management Newsletter had a column called The Ethicist in which ethical questions were raised and discussed. Although the newsletter column appears to no longer exist, there are efforts underway to create a new blog on the Academy’s website called The Ethicist.[1] Although such a blog is clearly a step in the right direction, it remains to be seen whether it would be read any more than the previous newsletter column or the Code itself. There are also links on the Academy of Management ethics web page to articles on issues related to ethics, most often commentaries written by members of the editorial team of one of the association’s major journals. In addition, at the past two annual meetings of the Academy, workshops sponsored by the Ethics Education Committee, then chaired by Marshall Schminke, have been offered as part of the doctoral consortia sponsored by the divisions. Divisions have been invited to have a workshop led by members of the Ethics Education Committee. About half the divisions have taken up the offer and have exposed students to a discussion of professional ethics and what it means to behave ethically as a member of the Academy. Because doctoral students are the next generation of members of our profession they are a particularly important target audience. Having attended several workshops and talked with the individuals conducting the workshops, however, I was struck by the variance in opinions about how an
individual should behave when confronted by rather simplistic and transparent descriptions of unethical behaviour. It is clear that additional efforts are needed to identify and clarify some of the ethical issues that management professors, present and future, can expect to encounter in their careers.

Elevating the Dialogue: What is the Next Level?

Although I strongly encourage the ongoing dialogue about ethics among students attending doctoral consortia at the annual meeting, I suspect we are reaching only a fraction of the students being trained to enter our profession. In addition to these workshops, I think the next step for the Academy is to push the discussion of ethics down to the level of university doctoral programs in management. I suspect some management departments do a good job of ethics training already but my observation of the doctoral students attending the ethics workshops suggests that many programs are not.

What would facilitate making the discussion of ethics an integral part of doctoral programs? This is a challenging goal in itself but one made more difficult by the fact that the Academy of Management does not accredit doctoral programs. Thus, the Academy has little leverage to persuade doctoral programs to encourage a discussion of ethical issues as part of the required curriculum. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) does accredit doctoral programs and it may be possible to work with that organization to encourage more ethics training in doctoral programs. However, AACSB accreditation focuses on business degree programs and not specific functional areas like management. In addition, they do not mandate the content of programs but instead focus on the extent schools are meeting self-set goals, which may or may not include training in ethics. Even so, partnering with AACSB to emphasize ethics training in doctoral programs may be worth a try.

A dialogue on ethics might be facilitated if educational materials are readily available to schools that focus on this topic. For example, this special forum published in MOR could be a valuable educational resource in doctoral seminars to facilitate discussions of ethical issues. Our doctoral students should be aware of the ethical issues that the papers in this issue of MOR discuss (e.g., submitting multiple papers off the same data base, protection of human subjects in MML designs, hypothesizing after the results are known). As valuable as this special issue is, however, it is limited in that it addresses research and publication issues but not other ethical issues relevant to a management professor’s larger role (e.g., teaching).

An important step that the Academy and similar organizations might take is to publish a case book on ethical behaviour, similar to the one published by the American Psychological Association. Short cases describing ethical dilemmas faced by faculty members could both highlight key issues and facilitate a discussion in doctoral seminars. This would not be a theoretical or conceptually philosophical
treatment of ethical behaviour. Instead, what I have in mind is a very practical behavioral guide that focuses on actual situations in which ethical issues arise in our teaching, research, and professional activities. A number of short cases (vignettes) have already been created and are available (e.g., in support of the ethics education workshops at the annual meeting). The cases could be accompanied with a short commentary provided by senior members of the profession that would help illustrate the complexity of some of the ethical issues we face (i.e., the grey areas). Not all of us may agree on what action is appropriate to take in a specific situation but the most important role of these cases and commentaries would be to identify the issues and encourage a discussion of them.

Elevating the Dialogue: What Should We Aspire to Achieve?

What should we aspire to ultimately accomplish by facilitating an ongoing dialogue on ethical issues, both at the association conferences such as those sponsored by the AOM and IACMR and in our doctoral programs? I think the ultimate goal is to make the consideration and discussion of ethical issues part of the day-to-day lives of students and professors. A useful model is provided by Lee and Mitchell’s (2011) contribution to this special issue. They describe weekly meetings of their research team, faculty and doctoral students, as a way to increase transparency, fairness, and inclusiveness. In addition to discussing specific issues related to their ongoing research, these meetings provide a forum in which students are encouraged to ask questions about the profession. I suspect that some of the questions students might have involve ethical issues.

An ongoing dialogue on ethics might also facilitate addressing ethical issues before they become problems. One interesting initiative with respect to research misconduct is taking place in other disciplines. It focuses attention on peer interventions when misconduct or bad science is encountered. In a survey of 2,599 principal investigators of research projects funded by the National Institute of Health, Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2010) found that 2,193 reported having observed research misconduct or bad science. The rather high percentage (84 percent) may be influenced by the rather broad definition of ‘bad science’, including simple computation errors and poorly supervising graduate assistants in addition to clear ethical misconduct (e.g., plagiarism and misreporting data). Of those observing problematic behaviour, 53 percent reported intervening personally with a colleague to correct the problem and 39 percent reported being extremely satisfied or satisfied with the outcome of their intervention. These authors and their colleagues (Keith-Spiegel, Sieber, & Koocher, 2010) strongly encourage peer interventions and have put together resource materials (‘Responding to Research Wrongdoing: A User-Friendly Guide’). This represents a very different model than the adjudication process that exists in the Academy of Management but one that would be facilitated by on-going research discussions of the type described by Lee and Mitchell.
CONCLUSIONS

The Academy of Management has taken a leadership role in focusing attention on what it means to behave ethically in our profession and the IACMR is leading the effort in China. Both associations are to be applauded. Beyond publishing a comprehensive code of ethics, however, it is time for both associations to more aggressively consider additional ways to expose their members, especially those just preparing to enter the profession, to ethical principles of behaviour. The goal is to make consideration of ethical issues a part of our day-to-day lives. Is this necessary? For those tempted to suggest that the incidents of bad science found in other disciplines are simply not a problem in management, it should be noted that a survey of management professors by Bedeian, Taylor, and Miller (2010) reported levels of observed misconduct and questionable research practices by others similar to the levels reported by Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2010). The need for action appears great.

NOTE


REFERENCES


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