The “Triple-P” Domains of Ethical Behavior for Higher Education

Much has been discussed in popular media these days about ethical behavior or perhaps the lack of it. Many of our recent economic misfortunes have been portrayed as resulting from unethical behaviors. Reports of the mortgage crisis, the savings and loan crisis, Enron, and Chernobyl are just a few examples. Moreover, much has been academically researched about unethical behaviors such as software piracy, and course assignment and exam cheating. Continuing in the same vein, it is almost commonplace and unnecessary to provide examples of unethical behavior by government officials and employees. Our society recognizes that we have a problem and looks to us, the field of higher education, for a solution, or at least part of a solution.

Understanding Ethics, Values and Morals

It is important to have an understanding of what ethical behavior is. While ethics may have a perceived foundation in morals, ethics tend to be personal or organizational specific based upon perceived values. An excellent example is that, for years it was unethical for the legal profession to advertise their services. Now, we only have to watch afternoon television to see legal service advertisements broadcasting in endless-loop fashion. Obviously, advertising was not immoral then and moral now. This demonstrates that, while ethical standards may have some basis in morality, ethics are often more akin to accepted organization values and practices.

Personal Experience is important

I learned many of my values and resulting personal ethical behavior from having parents who did not promote bad family ethical behavior. I can recount a single experience that shaped many of my values and my resulting personal ethical behavior more than anything else. When I was about six years old, while shopping with my mother, I stole an animal-shaped rubber eraser. When I exhibited my treasure to my mother, she explained that to take something that was not my property was stealing and wrong. She further added that the erasure was the store owner’s property and would miss the benefit of owning it. She had me return it to the store owner with my apology. The mental image that most impressed me was that the store owner was a person. I understood I had hurt or had the potential to hurt that person. It was a lesson learned that is still vivid in my memory. My personal story emphasizes that our own personal ethical behaviors are built upon a combination of learned values from our experiences in combination with an ability to see beyond our own self-interests. Research has shown that humans build a value bank which they will use to draw upon when faced with ethical decisions. In addition, they need to possess an empathy bank built from positive personal experiences with which they draw upon to understand how other people feel and understand their own reality. Likewise, organizational ethics are built upon the values that an organization has experienced over a period of many years. Organizations cannot possess empathy per se, but their leadership and culture can. It is not an overstatement to say that the organization’s culture provides both formal and informal ethical guidance. Thus, it is very important that an organization’s culture is not allowed to malform into an unethically clouded atmosphere.

Epitome of Ethical Behavior

Often the tendency is for over-authoring organizational policies and code of ethic documents in an attempt to nullify omission liabilities. What is meant is that, if one just puts that in writing, one is absolved from any liability. However, we have seen that it takes an effort at all levels within an organization to create and maintain a culture of ethical behavior.

In the field of higher education an epitome of ethical behavior can be described with three simple domains of ethical behavior. One can refer to them as the “Triple-P” domains.

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The first “P” ethical domain encompasses the understanding of privacy ethics. Privacy should not be confused with openness. In a highly technical society where rumors can spread in seconds, great care should be exhibited when personal knowledge is shared. All people should respect the privacy of the people they serve and those who serve them. While it is common for many to talk about others, divulging personal or organizational details often learned in confidence is unethical. More often than not, privacy violations are the result of attempts for self-empowerment and control of others or situations using a passive-aggressive strategy and demeanor. A culture that is permissive of privacy incursions often implodes upon itself.

The second “P” ethical domain is in regard to piracy and plagiarism. The lack of respect for proprietary products and knowledge is a serious problem. Audio and video products are often copied and shared, thus avoiding royalties for the creators and publishers of the products. In addition, it is a fine line between referring to existing scholarly work and plagiarism. Maintaining integrity in any published findings is crucial to furthering the goals of research and authoring endeavors. This is particularly important in the field of higher education. All scholarly works and creative endeavors need to be protected. However, most of the protection afforded is a result of consumers following ethical guidelines on a voluntary basis. This domain also includes cheating on examinations and assignments. In a way, this may be construed as a form of plagiarism or using someone else’s answers.

The third “P” ethical domain is pilfering (repeatedly stealing in small amounts) or the more serious profiteering (making an excessive profit often in a way that is thought to be unethical or dishonest). While there are laws that often attempt to trump these unethical behaviors, it is important to have defined organizational ethics that define the role an individual has in controlling what happens to funds and assets owned by an organization. So often an individual or individuals within an organization abscond with funds and property owned by their organization. If a subculture within the organization exists that supports these kinds of unethical activities, the organization itself is at risk financially. It should again be noted that any individual engaged in these kind of ethical violations are most likely subject to prosecution by the state. Whistle-blowing also has to be promoted with specific procedures supporting the reporting of unethical behavior. A culture that suppresses any effort to report unethical behavior is actually supporting unethical behaviors.

Conclusion

Learning experiences and a supporting culture are very important to guiding individuals and organizations through a lifelong ethically charged minefield. While an understanding of our values is important to any self-efficacy regarding ethical behaviors, an organization’s culture has to be created and nurtured in order to support ethical behaviors by its membership. Thus, the field of higher education holds a great responsibility to educate and lead administrators, faculty and students toward a lifetime of achievement and ethical behavior.

References