

How *The Good Place* can make your classroom a better place

Abstract:

This session builds on last year's highly successful and well-attended symposium on *The Good Place*, the acclaimed NBC comedy. While last year's session focused on using Season 1 of the series to teach elements of ethical philosophy to students, this session delves into the nuances of later seasons that explore how organizations cope with ethical complexities related to leadership, culture, and identity. Attendees will learn why and how to use *The Good Place* in any management course that contains lessons on business ethics.

Keywords: Ethics, TV Shows, Leadership

Introduction

Scholarship has found that business ethics is often best taught through media familiar to students, including comic books (Gerde & Foster, 2008), cinema (Weays, 2017), and even internet memes (Siddiqui, et al. 2018). Accordingly, the best faculty are constantly striving to find new modalities to deliver content (Carneiro, 2004). Television critics claim that we have now entered into a Golden Age of Television (Leslie, 2017), which makes TV shows a particularly relevant medium for relating to the student body in 2020. Among the most popular and critically acclaimed television shows is NBC's sitcom *The Good Place*, a non-religious exploration of the afterlife as judgment for living an ethical life. *The Good Place* was nominated for seven Emmy's between 2018 and 2019 (Television Academy, 2020). What is highly exciting about using *The Good Place* is that it builds off of novel and current ethical issues. The show even has hired UCLA ethics professor Dr. Pamela Hieronymi on staff to ensure that the topics presented on the show are accurate portrayals of ethical philosophy and dilemmas (Wolf, 2018).

On *The Good Place*, references abound to the world in 2016-20, including details as intricate as celebrity divorces (Channing Tatum and Jenna Dewan) and changes in NFL football team lineups (Blake Bortles traded from Jacksonville Jaguars to Los Angeles Rams). This reminds students that what they are watching is fresh and pertains to their current lives. Moreover, topics covered on the show incapsulate the challenges of being a new manager (Lucas, 2019). One of the most meaningful lines that is likely to resonate with any student or employee who has a hint of imposter syndrome comes from protagonist Eleanor: "I did a bad job of being in charge of my own life, and now I'm supposed to be in charge of everyone else's life?"

Theoretical Foundation

The importance of ethics has been studied in a variety of contexts. Fox (2016) examines how new roles can cause ethical dramas because people fail to adapt to the new standards associated with their new responsibilities. Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi (2004) have studied how organizational context itself provides rationalization and justification for the rampant spread of corrupt behavior. Additionally, consumer behavior scholars have investigated whether social identity shapes ethical purchasing decisions (Papaoikonomou, Cascon-Pereira, & Ryan, 2016).

Because ethical research is highly technical and ethical philosophy is often very convoluted, it can be especially difficult to distill these topics into teachable segments. Many undergraduate ethics classes may not even incorporate ethical research, and instead rely on teaching case studies or dated principles of ethics. In fact, *The Journal of Business Ethics* had a special issue on the intersection of leadership, identity, and ethics in 2012, and the three most commonly used Business Ethics books (as of 2019) do not even mention the construct of identity. If topics are being omitted from the study of ethics because they are too difficult to explain to students through traditional texts and lectures, then it would behoove us to find the best resources for teaching business ethics in its entirety. *The Good Place* presents such an opportunity.

Learning Objectives

The student learning objectives for this exercise are threefold, at the end of the class students should (1) understand ethical philosophies and constructs, (2) be able to apply ethical theories to management dilemmas, and (3) be able to communicate and discuss these theories and their applications in a rational and composed manner.

Exercise Overview

The session will highlight multiple clips and provide discussion prompts that can be used in class, giving instructors a number of options for teaching ethics depending on their intended learning objectives. These clips could be used in an Ethics course or any Management course that has an ethics component (like Organizational Behavior or Introduction to Management). We have used these clips with undergrads, but they could be appropriate for MBA audience, especially younger MBA students. Generally speaking, we recommend showing the clips in class to facilitate discussion, though it is possible to assign them as homework or use them in an online course and replace the discussions with short writing assignments.

Session Description

We intend to use 60 minutes for this session. Our proposed schedule is as follows;

- (10 min) Introduction of facilitators and attendees.
 - Personal introduction of everyone including; Name, institution, & type of classes taught
 - Discussion Prompt: Do you introduce current topics or research into teaching ethics? If so, how?
 - Discussion Prompt: What media currently assists you in teaching ethics?
- (10 min) Introduction to *The Good Place*
 - Explanation of the show's premise and characters
 - Quick clip to show how ethical theories are explained in the show, through a clip from Season 1 of *The Good Place*
 - Discussion Prompt: What topics do you think your students would find relatable on the show?
- (10 min) Failure of Leadership

- Clip of Eleanor's self-doubt in her new Season 4 role of manager
- Discussion Prompt: How can we prepare students to be deal with setbacks as new managers?
- Discussion Prompt: How can we ensure that those setbacks will not result in unethical behaviors?
- (10 min) Bad Place Culture
 - Clip of Bad Place cultural norms (Kars for Kids)
 - Discussion Prompt: How does a negative culture reinforce itself? Would you or your employees be more likely to behave unethically in such an environment?
- (10 min) Modern Problems
 - Trolley Problem as portrayed on *The Good Place* (Season 2)
 - Trolley Problem as portrayed in Internet memes
 - Trolley Problem as originally proposed by Phillipa Foot
 - How the Trolley problem can best be integrated into your classes
- (10 min) Wrap-Up
 - Explanation of the effectiveness of these assignments for both undergraduate and graduate level classes.
 - Opportunity for questions and discussion focusing on best practices for evaluating student's understanding of ethical theories through assignments and in exams

Resources Needed: Classroom with capability to play video clips from the internet

Conference Track: We believe that using *The Good Place* is an innovative way to present ethics in management classrooms which leads to student discussions in which they can collaborate with each other due to shared interest in a tv show that is current and topical to their lives.

REFERENCES

- Ambrosini, V, Billsberry, J., and Collier, N. (2008). Teaching soft issues in strategic management with films: Arguments and suggestions. *International Journal of Management Education*, 8, 1, 63-72.
- Anand, V., Ashforth, B., & Joshi, M. (2004). Business as Usual: The acceptance and perpetuation of corruption in organizations. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 18,2, 1-52.
- Carneiro, A. (2004). Teaching management and management educators: Some considerations. *Management Decision*, 42, 3/4, 430-438.
- Fox, J. (2016). Why self-doubt makes leaders better. *Training & Development*, 43, 2, 24-35
- Gerde, V. W. & Foster, R. S. 2008. X-Men ethics: Using comic books to teach business ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 77, 3, 245-258.
- Leslie, I. 2017. Watch it while it lasts: Our Golden Age of Television. *Financial Times*.
<https://www.ft.com/content/68309b3a-1f02-11e7-a454-ab04428977f9>. Retrieved January 7, 2020.
- Lucas, S. (2019). The Good Place's Eleanor has a meltdown that all managers can relate to.
https://www.inc.com/suzanne-lucas/the-good-places-eleanor-has-a-meltdown-that-all-managers-can-relate-to.html?fbclid=IwAR14NOUaGGWh-smW_lv6KfbE6ux9ERv1qyWLziSqoW_oI5v73r1cVN6Cj4o. Retrieved January 7, 2020.
- Papaoikonomou, E., Cascon-Pereira, R., & Ryan, G. (2016). Constructing and communicating and ethical consumer identity: A social identity approach. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16, 1, 209-231.

Siddiqi, N., Bains, A., Mushtaq, A. & Aleem, S. 2018. Analyzing threads of sexism in new age humour: A content analysis of internet memes. *Indian Journal of Social Research*, 59, 3, 255-267.

Teas, W. 2017. Show me a class that's got a good movie, show me. *Teaching Business Ethics*. 17, 1, 115-126.

Television Academy 2020. The Good Place. <https://www.emmys.com/shows/good-place>. Retrieved January 8, 2020.

Wolf, J. 2018. <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/how-ucla-philosophy-professor-pamela-hieronimi-helped-construct-the-good-place>. Retrieved January 7, 2020