

Teaching Human Resource Management With Ethical Lenses

Abstract

Although the topic of business ethics has captured the attention of business education, it has not permeated human resource management classes where decisions and policies have profound ethical implications. As a result, students may not be able to identify the ethical issues when they arise and develop a robust ethics toolbox to help them navigate these issues. In this proposal, we advocate for the integration of ethics in human resource management classes. In this proposed presentation, we discuss four ethical perspectives (i.e., utilitarianism, rights and duties, justice and fairness, and ethic of care) to be used in solving five ethical dilemmas in the broad HR context regarding employee recruitment, employee promotion, performance appraisal, compensation, and employee discipline.

Keywords: Human resource management; Ethics; HR practices

Introduction

Scholars lament that many business schools lack a strong ethics curriculum (Etzioni, 2002). As a result, business students may not be equipped with a robust ethics toolbox for their future profession (Christian & Gumbus, 2009). Despite significant progress made in revamping the overall curriculum in business education, ethics and ethical discourse are still largely missing from the HR courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

This omission is unfortunate. Though some consider ethics to be disentangled from HRM practices (Watson, 2007), ethical subjectivity is the center of most HR decision makings in the organization (Dale, 2012) and HR decisions and policies directly impact workers' welfare in the organization (Rhodes & Harvey, 2012). Therefore, isolating ethics from HR practices risks commodifying the employees (Dale, 2012) and encourages a dehumanized view of the labor relationships (de Gama et al., 2012). On the contrary, integrating ethics into the organization's HR practices enhance the organization's reputation (Offstein & Dufresne, 2007).

In recent years, HR practices' ethicality is gaining more interest among HR researchers and practitioners (Offstein & Dufresne, 2007). However, conversations surrounding the ethical component of HRM practices are still relatively scarce (de Gama et al., 2012). In this proposal, we intend to build on the momentum and discuss ethical implications in HR through four major ethical perspectives: utilitarianism, rights and duties, justice and fairness, and ethic of care. We plan to demonstrate the relevance of these perspectives through 5 scenarios in the HR context ranging from employee selection and employee promotion, to compensation, performance appraisal, and employee discipline. By engaging students in the discussions of these scenarios, we hope that they could gain not only ethical awareness but also useful frameworks in ethical decision making.

Theoretical Foundation

Although the importance of business ethics is getting recognized, it is rarely, if at all, applied to the typical HRM curriculum. At the same time, HR practitioners cannot solely rely on the policies and guidelines to address all HR-related issues (de Gama et al., 2012). They need to be equipped with the necessary ethical thinking skills to meet the challenges associated with HR dilemmas. Therefore, if we hope to move towards more ethical HRM practices, we need to prepare future HR practitioners early on by incorporating ethical discourse in their HRM courses.

At the center of HR dilemmas lies the fact that HR practitioners frequently confront the challenge of balancing their role as the employee champion and their commitment to increase business efficiency and profit (de Gama et al., 2012; Rhodes & Harvey, 2012). While there is no universal formula to ethical dilemmas in HR decision-making (Dale, 2012), we hope to prepare students to practice and incorporate ethical perspectives in dealing with the challenges. In this regard, early exposures to HR decision-making through lively scenarios such as mini-cases, videos, movies could help students develop a sophisticated ethical framework essential in their future role as an HR manager, leader, and/or employee.

More specifically, the four ethical perspectives mentioned above are particularly relevant. Utilitarianism speculates that decisions are evaluated by weighing the benefits and the costs produced for society. Kant's rights and duties perspective emphasizes that all human beings are equal only by virtue of being human beings and encourages people to act as they would want all other people to act towards them. Justice and fairness compare the benefits and burdens of each of the parties and evaluate how benefits and burdens are distributed. Lastly, the ethic of care advocates for caring towards those particular individuals with whom we have valuable close relationships (Schumann, 2001).

Teaching Implications

Despite the importance of teaching ethics in the early stages of students' learning curve (Offstein & Dufresne, 2007), many business schools do not have a course dedicated to teaching ethics and its application. Instead, instructors incorporate ethics in classes such as introduction to management and organizational behavior. We believe that the ethics component is largely missing from HR courses, and we advocate for the integration of ethical frameworks in teaching various HR functions in the organization. We believe that students need to: a) be mindful about their personal philosophy of ethics and b) learn how to fuse their philosophy of ethics in applying traditional HR practices in various scenarios.

Learning Objectives

At the end of the session, participants will be able to:

- Describe their philosophy of ethics.
- Describe how being mindful about their ethical philosophy can enhance students' decision making.
- Analyze various scenarios using their philosophy of ethics.
- Discuss the pros and cons of choosing one ethical perspective over the others in HR applications.

Session Overview

Instructors can enhance students' ability to make HR decisions by helping students develop their philosophy of ethics and use this as a framework for future HR applications. Therefore, in this session, First, we will ask participants to write a one-paragraph statement of their philosophy of ethics. We will instruct them to simply explain their code of ethics using a broad spectrum of statements (e.g., people should be treated equally). Next, we will discuss the

four ethical perspectives of utilitarianism, rights and duties, justice and fairness, and ethic of care, and ask participants to do a self-reflection and prioritize the four ethical perspective based on their importance in their future decision making. Then, we will provide participants with five scenarios (a blend of written mini cases and YouTube videos) and ask them to analyze the mini case study using their philosophy of ethics. We will ask participants to explain which ethical perspective(s) they used to frame the issues and decide the appropriateness of the HR practice. In the end, we will open a discussion among the participants to discuss the challenges they confronted using their ethical framework in their decision making, whether they found this method beneficial, and how they can maximize the students' application of ethics in HR decision makings.

Session Description

Total time requested: 60 minutes allocated as follows:

- Introductions: 5 minutes
 - After a brief introduction of the presenters, participants will be asked to introduce themselves.
- Participants will write one paragraph about their philosophy of ethics: 5 minutes.
- Presenting the four ethical perspectives with examples: 10 minutes.
 - Scenario 1: Employee recruitment
 - Scenario 2: Employee promotion
 - Scenario 3: Performance appraisal
 - Scenario 4: Compensation
 - Scenario 5: Employee discipline

- 5 scenarios will be presented one by one and participants will use their ethical framework for HR decision making: 35 minutes.
- Debrief: 5 min
 - What are the benefits of incorporating students' ethical perspective in their HR decision making?
 - What challenges will instructors confront in using this exercise?
 - How can instructors facilitate ethical decision making and promote ethical mindfulness in HR applications?

Scenarios:

- **Scenario 1: Recruitment:** Four months ago, a co-worker left and your office has been extremely overworked. You have been working long overtime hours (without overtime pay) trying to make up the slack that has occurred due to this vacancy. The hiring freeze has been lifted and you can begin to recruit applicants to fill the position. After a successful round of interviews with applicants, your supervisor has made a selection, but wants your input on the final hire. When he tells you who his first choice is, you are immediately concerned. The woman he wants to hire is pregnant. You discovered this by accident when you overheard her talking on her cell phone in the hallway after her interview. You are fairly confident your boss does not know she is expecting, and you know she is not required to tell a potential employer that she is pregnant. You cannot help but worry that you will spend the next 6 months training her and after such time, she will go on maternity leave or worse, quit. Then you will be stuck once again

trying to fill in to make up the slack. Your boss asks you for your opinion on the candidate.

- **Scenario 2:** Employee promotion: Mickey, Minnie, and Goofy works at the same office. Corporate needs one person from the three to head the new office in another town (lateral/upper-level move). All are equally qualified. The only difference is, Goofy is single, while Mickey and Minnie are married to each other and have settled down in this town with their young children. How should we decide on the job assignment? Should we choose Goofy because Mickey and Minnie are married with children while Goofy is single?
- **Scenario 3:** Performance appraisal: Jeff works as a supervisor in an assembly manufacturing company. Recently, he was asked to perform a performance appraisal from all of his subordinates. The majority of his subordinates work above average, except for three employees. One who is always late does a mediocre job, and two go above and beyond for their tasks all the time. Jeff expects to get a promotion in a few days, and whether he gets this promotion or not depends partly on his subordinates' recommendation. In the hopes of receiving positive recommendations from his subordinates, Jeff rates all of the employees above average.
- **Scenario 4:** Compensation: Sarah owns a successful business in a small town. She has an employee, Nick, who is very smart, hardworking, and diligent. Sarah believes that Nick is an important asset to the success of her company. From a confidential source, Sarah learns that Nick has been offered a job in a reputable company that is a direct competitor to her business. To avoid losing Nick, Sarah

increases his salary by 10% without telling him that she is aware of the offer. However, to compensate for the 10% increase in Nick's salary, Sarah has to decrease other employees' pay by 1-2%. Sarah cannot afford to lose Nick, but she can replace other employees.

- **Scenario 5:** Employee Discipline: "You are the founder of a small social enterprise, which you have set up to help your local community. The company makes and sells ice-cream, but its social mission focuses on helping ex-offenders get back to work. Anti-theft rules are clearly explained in all employees' orientation. Anyone caught stealing will be fired and prosecuted immediately, no exceptions. You recently went through this process when you had to let Sarah go, one employee who was not sharing part of her tips with all staff members per company's regulations. John is a model employee. Having spent three months in juvenile prison for petty theft, he seems a different man now and works hard. You often review his account, and he has always proven to be trustworthy. Last month, his mother passed away, leaving him responsible for his seven-year-old sister. When checking this week's books, you find that \$100 is missing. Prompted, John immediately admits having 'borrowed' the money 'to help feed his sister'" (Magrizos & Roumpi, 2020: p. 485)

REFERENCES

- Christian, V., & Gumbus, A. (2009). Shades of gray: Applying professional codes of ethics to workplace dilemmas. *Organization Management Journal*, 6(3), 178–199.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/omj.2009.22>

- Dale, K. (2012). The Employee as 'Dish of the Day': The Ethics of the Consuming/Consumed Self in Human Resource Management. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *111*(1), 13–24.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1437-9>
- de Gama, N., McKenna, S., & Peticca-Harris, A. (2012). Ethics and HRM: Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis: An Alternative Approach to Ethical HRM Through the Discourse and Lived Experiences of HR Professionals. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *111*(1), 97–108.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1479-z>
- Etzioni, A. (2002, August 4). *When It Comes to Ethics, B-Schools Get an F*. Eweb:248903.
<https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1008570>
- Magrizos, S., & Roumpi, D. (2020). Doing the right thing or doing things right? The role of ethics of care and ethics of justice in human resource management of social enterprises. *Strategic Change*, *29*(4), 485–496. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.2359>
- Offstein, E. H., & Dufresne, R. L. (2007). Building strong ethics and promoting positive character development: The influence of HRM at the United States Military Academy at West Point. *Human Resource Management*, *46*(1), 95–114.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20147>
- Rhodes, C., & Harvey, G. (2012). Agonism and the Possibilities of Ethics for HRM. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *111*(1), 49–59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1441-0>
- Schumann, P. L. (2001). A moral principles framework for human resource management ethics. *Human Resource Management Review*, *11*(1), 93–111. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-4822\(00\)00042-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-4822(00)00042-5)