A Case Study in Teaching Character and Values for Business Leaders

The challenge of how best to educate business students to live lives of moral integrity has been one of constant interest for many who are connected in MOBTS. However, despite our best efforts as educators, ethical business scandals persist, which no doubt feeds current polling data that reveals very low levels of public trust in business executives relative to other commonly identified professions (Gallup, 2022). In addition, niggling research findings will not go away suggesting perhaps that our management discipline’s approach to teaching business ethics is inadequate (Frank, Gilovich & Regan, 1993; Krishnan, 2008). It seems, therefore, that we would benefit from the challenge of developing new strategies and approaches to help our students better develop an inner moral compass that honors their innate ethical sensibilities and our shared social contract.

In this PDW, I offer my experience with, and response to, this challenge of developing new approaches to teaching ethics by focusing on student character and values. This distinction and interplay between character and values on the one hand, and ethics on the other, is best described in the following quote by Martin Seligman (2011), in his book on positive psychology:

“Ethics and what we care about are not by any means the same thing. I might be a master of ethical reasoning, a whiz at moral philosophy, but if what I really care about is [maximizing profits], my behavior will be [full of contempt for things of worth].... Ethics are the rules you apply to get what you care about. What you care about—your values—is more basic than ethics. If the economic downturn [of 2008] was caused by mathematical wizards and greedy salespeople who profited hugely in the short run by selling derivatives that they knew would crash and burn in the long run, would more courses in ethics have helped? Was the problem ignorance of ethical principles? I think this puts more weight on ethics than ethics can bear and not enough weight on values” (2011, 229).

Based on this framing by Seligman and others in the fields of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry, I set about to develop and deliver a course best described by its title: “Leadership Through Character.” As I set about this task, I had to wrestle with the usual challenges of deciding on learning outcomes and objectives, curriculum development, and implications for design and delivery—all in the midst of a global pandemic that moved most of this instruction to an online modality. It is from this context and spirit that my goals for this proposed PDW session have emerged, which are to share my overview of “lessons learned” (thanks now to 14 iterations and counting of this course). Depending on participant interest, I will also share teaching notes, handouts and examples of some of the solutions I found to such challenges as:

* What is the proper definition and specification of the content domain of character and values for business students (i.e., what is it, and what is it not)?
* What is the proper set of realistic learning outcomes and objectives for such a course?
* What are the predictable challenges with regard to the following instructional and pedagogical imperatives:
  + the focus and content of key learning modules
  + the development of practical assignments to facilitate self-exploration
  + the development of cases and similar instructional content for student analysis and personal application
  + implementation and engagement with students via weekly individualized coaching and feedback as part of a personalized development plan
  + self-reflection through writing assignments (including the use of appreciative inquiry for identifying area for personal growth and development)

In sum, this proposed PDW will explore both the challenges and lessons learned from the development and delivery of a course dedicated to helping students face the implications of their character and core values for greater moral courage and integrity as business leaders. A facilitative and collaborative approach with those attending will be pursued with the goal of eliciting a high level of participant engagement. While my broader objective is to share “lessons learned” from this approach that focuses on teaching character and values, my more specific goal is simply to use this as background for engaging with participants in a process of guided facilitation for an intriguing discussion that will encourage audience participation throughout the session.

References

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