

From Theory to Practice in Business Ethics

FROM THE EDITORS

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The conference for which the papers in this volume of EJBO were originally prepared was the European Business Ethics Network (EBEN) Research Conference 2010 held in Tampere, Finland, arranged jointly by the RESPMAN Research Group at the University of Tampere, University of Jyväskylä School of Business and Economics, and the Finnish Chapter of EBEN.

The topic of the conference was "From Theory to Practice – How does business ethics matter". The aim was to focus on research regarding the reasons for organizations to take business ethics seriously by concentrating on motivations, consequences and implications of business ethics. The multidisciplinary nature of business ethics was at present in the conference presentations.

The presentations covered a wide range of topics such as integration of business ethics in organizational networks, strategies, processes and practices; consequences of ethical and unethical behavior in and between organizations; ethical development of organizations and individuals; contradictions between ethics in strategy and in practice; communication of business ethics and ethical values; role of cultural values in business ethics. In addition, there were three special tracks in the conference: 'Virtue in Business and Management', 'Responsible Investments in Times of Turmoil' and 'ISO 26000 SR'.

Challenges of business ethics research

The conference topic adhered to an important question, the one being one of the major issues business ethicists have criticized in the past. For example in 1998 John Hasnas wrote that

"Critics of the discipline often point out that business ethicists are usually academics, and worse, philosophers, who speak in the language of abstract ethical theory. Thus, they are accused of expressing their ideas in terms of 'deontological requirements,' 'consequentialist considerations,' 'the categorical imperative,' 'rule utilitarianism,' 'the hedonistic calculus,' 'human flourishing' and other locutions that are essentially meaningless to the ordinary business person who possesses lit-

tle or no philosophical training. Business people, it is pointed out, express themselves in ordinary language and tend to resist dealing in abstractions. What they want to know is how to resolve the specific problems that confront them." (Hasnas, 1998, p. 19.)

Indeed, the abstract language used by moral philosophers is not always readily transferrable to practical business life. Abstract principles of ethical theories are not easily applicable to practical dilemmas and problems. However, ethical issues are at present in business life as much as in any other areas of human life – and need to be properly solved. In addition, practical decision making of businesses involves and is firmly integrated to a vast amount of societal implications which influence other members of society and increasingly globally. All these issues increase the need for understanding ethics and its application in business.

Recent developments

Business ethics scholars have taken seriously the criticism Hasnas (1998) refers to. There seems to be an increasing consensus regarding the significance of business ethics. Business ethics issues are not only increasingly discussed by academics but also by people in practical business life (Crane and Matten, 2004, p. 13). Theories are discussed from more diverse perspectives than earlier including contributions from various contexts and cultures.

In addition, the importance of the topic has been acknowledged in educational settings, although several authors have similarly questioned the current state of business education whether business education can promote responsibility among students (e.g. McPhail 2001; Ghoshal, 2005; Pfeffer, 2005; Lämsä et al., 2008). Despite criticism the topic seems to be discussed and taught increasingly in business studies and management development programs. The 'ethics profiles' of business schools are being used even as a tool for ranking business school programmes (Aspen Institute, Beyond Grey Pinstripes).

Articles by scholars taking the integration of theory and practice into consid-

eration were accepted for publication in this special issue. The review process led us to select six articles for publication. All of them participate in the above mentioned discussions.

Introduction to the articles in this issue

First, two papers authored by Kujala, Penttilä and Tuominen as well as Olkkonen and Luoma-Aho participate in the discussion about how responsible business is related to various intangible assets. In these articles business responsibilities and business ethics are associated with various kinds of inducements or justifications, such as various social capitals, for example, innovations, image, knowledge, trust and reputation assets (Gardberg and Fombrun, 2006; Orlitzky, et al., 2003). Indeed, the link between responsible business and a company's competitive advantage has been under critical discussion since the 1960s (Cochran and Wood, 1984).

In their article Kujala et al. provide a model for building responsible brands emphasizing the internal perspective of the company. Despite increased interest in ethical consumerism, research into the concept of so-called 'responsible brands' is fairly new and undeveloped. The paper aims to integrate brand building as a more integral part of corporate responsibility. The authors argue that the building of a responsible brand requires not only transparency, but also a stronger vision, sounder value foundation, better internal commitment, and better implementation than is usually a case when brands are developed. Creating a responsible brand is thus a far more systematic and throughout process than a mere advertising plan.

Olkkonen and Luoma-aho focus on stakeholder expectations of corporate responsibility from a communication perspective. They suggest that companies can both exceed and manage expectations in practice by building up a corporate citizenship profile that guides their specialization in responsibility. According to them, the value of such specialization is that it can make the corporate responsibility of a company easier to communicate. Olkkonen and Luoma-aho highlight that communication has a key role in managing stakeholder expectations since communication can maintain, increase or diminish the expectations. The authors offer an interesting framework for stakeholder expectations and company response from the viewpoint of the role of communication.

The second theme in this special issue is sustainability and sustainable development. In particular, such topics whether and how businesses can provide a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment are discussed. In their article Miguel-Molina, Miguel Molina and Rumiche-Sosa examine whether luxury resorts indicate sustainability in the Maldives where tourist attraction is very high but the nature is also specifically fragile. They studied luxury and non-luxury resorts websites reviewing the potential of sustainable tourism. As a result, the relationship between luxury and sustainability remains debatable. The authors suggest concrete policies to be made in order to increase sustainable policies.

Furthermore, Li, Toppinen, Tuppura, Puumalainen and Hujala discuss about the determinants and patterns of sustainability disclosure in an environmentally sensitive sector, namely global forest industry. They conducted an empirical study of the topic by applying the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework. Despite its popularity in practice rather few academic studies have been done drawing upon the framework. The authors argue that, in particular, socially oriented issues such as human

rights, labour practices and social responsibility are relatively weakly developed in the global forest sector reporting compared to environmental and economic issues.

The third theme offers new ways to looking previous theories. Particularly a topic how the new ways can contribute to our understanding of ethics and simultaneously diminish the tension between theory and practice is of interest. By drawing on authors such as Jung and Maslow, Rozuel provides a thought-provoking argumentation by using the concept of 'transcendence' in order to examine the possibilities of this idea for business ethics research and praxis. She argues that a tension between the traditional view of a profit seeking firm and an ethically behaving, long-term goal setting is due to one-sidedness of arguments used in earlier discussions. By focusing on the transcendence at the level of an individual, a further discussion is opened towards the possibilities of business ethics created by transcendence.

Finally, in the seventh paper of this issue, Deslandes draws on the philosophy of Wittgenstein by arguing that previous literature of management and organizations have provided somewhat scant interpretations of Wittgenstein's ideas. Thus, he demonstrates how Wittgenstein's writings while emphasizing the significance of a context may indeed help in shaping the conceptualization of managerial ethics on the basis of practices. He concludes by offering further research suggestions.

A final comment

We appreciate the contributions which were received to this special issue. Further, we thank warmly the authors for participating in the ongoing dialogue about how to combine theory and practice in business ethics. We hope that readers find this special issue as enlightening as we did while preparing it.

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