

# DEVELOPING CODES OF ETHICS: SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW TO MAKE CODES OF ETHICS WORK

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## Introduction

Having undertaken a cursory explanation of the difference between the two types of code and bearing in mind the earlier discussion about the ways in which common approaches to developing these codes can lead to failure, what can be said by way of advice about the appropriate way to proceed?

To many, the following observations will seem blindingly obvious. The only thing that might prevent them from being labelled as the fruit of common sense is the fact that they are so uncommonly applied in practice.

## Map the baseline

It is interesting to note that very few organisations take the trouble to assess the culture that they seek to reinforce or change. Anecdotal evidence or a kind of 'group memory' may provide a fecund source of assumptions that are seldom tested. At the very least, this opens one to the risk that the ideals of an elite come to form the basis for developing an approach to the organisation's ethos. In the same vein, it is possible that a 'mythical' culture can emerge from the minds of idealistic enthusiasts. It is possible to avoid such pit-falls by the relatively simple expedient of conducting a 'values audit'.

In its simplest form such an audit will seek to establish three things:

- think to be its most important values?
- believe to be the ideal level of presence of each of these values?
- believe to be the actual level of presence of each of these values?

Such a survey will help to identify what people think to be important. But more importantly this exercise will begin to identify what has been called 'the values gap'. It is an obvious step beyond this point to involve the workforce in suggesting the means to close the gap. In addition to this the audit will provide a base-line against which progress (such as in closing the gap) can be assessed.

## **Involve everyone**

Although becoming something of a cliché, it is still important to observe that people are more likely to apply rules that they have had a hand in developing than those which have been handed down - as if from 'on high'. At a fairly basic level it is easy to understand how it is that a degree of ownership of a process can create an acknowledged prima facie obligation. This naturally works to the advantage of those who look for compliance.

An additional practical reason for ensuring a broad base of involvement in the development and implementation of the codes is that this will increase the likelihood that the resulting documents will be relevant to the daily experiences of those to whom they apply. Beyond this, widespread involvement will help to ensure that codes don't call for one kind of approach while custom and practice demand another.

However, there are more important reasons for involving everyone. The foremost of these is that such a policy can be an effective expression of the principle that all people are owed respect. The fact that a company chooses to encourage all of its people to participate in defining its ethos indicates that personnel are regarded as being more than mere means for securing the organisation's ends.

An open culture in which each person is encouraged to contribute to the process outlined above is one that is likely to be one in which trust can be engendered. It is likely to be a culture with the underlying resilience to cope with periods of rapid change. When value questions are reserved for the judgement of the few (lest the public airing of such issues cause dissension), then the foundations of an organisation can be undermined by hidden pockets of unresolved difference. Cracks are papered over until the degree of tension increases to an unsustainable level.

Finally, it is important to understand that the requirement to involve everyone suggests that the process should be extended from the board-room to the factory floor. In a similar vein, the various codes ought to apply to all members of the organisation, and if there are to be differences, then these will need to be justified.

## **Aim for short development cycles**

Some organisations accept the importance of consulting their employees. But there is less of a concern to provide timely reports of the findings. Such practices can lead to a serious erosion in the level of morale within an organisation. People become cynical and easily develop the perception that the entire exercise was nothing more than a 'gesture' by management.

On the practical front, the quicker the turn-around, the greater the likelihood that positive reinforcement can be achieved.

## **Build in a process for review**

It is important to avoid circumstances in which codes come to be seen as stale or 'set in stone'. It does not take many generations before unreconstructed codes lose their immediacy and relevance. Should this happen, then the code is likely to fail in its application. This is not to suggest that companies need constantly to be reinventing the wheel. It may be that despite being regularly (and fairly frequently) reviewed, the code(s) will continue, unchanged for years.

However, the development of a review process will help to ensure that the documents remain relatively fresh and relevant. Indeed, the process of keeping the code(s) before people as living documents can prove to be an extremely effective 'handle' for those who have responsibility for developing strategies for the effective management of values.

## **Managers don't need to surrender responsibility**

Much of the above suggests a commitment to principles of workplace democracy. Many managers will object to this implied orientation. Bearing this in mind it should be stressed that none of the above is meant to suggest that managers ought to surrender their prerogative to manage. An important part of the process will be to define and articulate the various spheres of responsibility. It is perfectly reasonable for managers to specify that while they are genuinely interested in consulting their colleagues they will, in the end, have to accept responsibility for making the final decisions.

Having said this, there may be separate reasons for managers to extend the decision-making process so that it involves their colleagues. Such a decision might be part of a process of evolution away from the technical paradigm of management towards the less precise art of leadership. But that is another topic.

## **Aim for authenticity rather than homogeneity**

Some people labour under the false impression that there is just one type of culture that can be described legitimately as possessing sound ethical characteristics. The prevalence of this sort of belief may be a contributing factor to the tendency (noted above) to gravitate towards generic products that can be bought 'off the shelf'. There is also a level of comfort that flows from adopting positions that are similar to the existing norm.

Yet there is no need for homogeneity in the cultures and codes of organisations. In normal circumstances one would expect individual differences flowing from the existence of variations in defining ends, personnel and so on, to lead to natural variety in the types of ethos to be found in distinct organisations.

All the same, there is no essential virtue in variety. One would not be too surprised to

find organisations sharing a number of commitments and values. However, the key feature to be sought is an authentic expression of what people hold to be important and right.

## **See the process as an investment**

One can mount convincing arguments to support the claim that there are ethical grounds for encouraging broad participation in the process of developing codes. Yet one needs to recognise that no matter how attractive and convincing these arguments, it is almost certain that organisations will focus on the 'bottom line'. And they will do so with the clear recognition that the 'quick fix' is the cheaper option. To follow the recommendations outlined in this chapter would be to commit a significant investment of resources - especially resources of time and personnel. So why make such an investment?

Many would accept that the rational approach is to invest in ways that lead to the generation of continuing benefits. Given the pervasiveness of the ethical dimension in all that we do, organisations cannot afford to sacrifice the additional effectiveness that flows from this process for the sake of achieving false efficiencies.

There are a number of other points that could be made touching on subjects such as the need for codes to be in plain English, to use inclusive language and so on. Any observations in these areas would be largely self-evident.

## **Conclusion**

As noted, much of the discussion can be accounted for as the expression of simple common sense. Yet the context in which these comments have been made is one in which there is likely to be resistance to the element of uncertainty that lies at the heart of the recommendations. This element flows from the fact that although most people are attracted to the fields of certainty, it is an unavoidable aspect of the human condition that we inhabit an ethical landscape that is inherently imprecise.

A decision to adopt an effective approach to the development of codes will require managers to recognise and accept that they are engaging in a task that requires them to 'explore' rather than control the cultures they inhabit and share. So why surrender a capacity to control in favour of a far less predictable process?

The answer to this question may be as old as history itself. Aeons have passed since legislators embarked upon the task of devising tools to curb the impulses of human beings. The scribes have used gallons of ink in the drafting of black-letter law. When alienated from its provisions, people experience the law as a yoke to be cast off as soon as it is safe to do so.

That is why codes will fail unless situated in a culture where the individual is respected as the ultimate source of value.

References/footnotes:

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