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REFLECTION AS THE ENGINE OF ETHICAL INQUIRY

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In this age of Enron and World-Com, how can we jump-start much-needed ethical inquiry within the corporate world? The engine to do so may well be reflection, especially in its collective form. Because reflection unlocks theory from practice, brings to the surface insights gained from experience, and offers a framework for uncovering hidden assumptions, it serves as a fundamental process for delving into the domain of ethics.

Reflection is the practice of pondering the meaning to self and/or to others of what has recently transpired in the immediate environment. It thus constitutes the ability to bring to light and make explicit to oneself and one's colleagues what has been planned, observed, or achieved in practice. In particular, it privileges the process of inquiry, leading to a level of understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in the heat of the moment. This deep understanding, in turn, provides a basis for future action.

Three Aspects of Reflection

There are three aspects of reflection in work settings that are often overlooked but potentially vital to ethical inquiry: first, reflection should be collective or public; second, reflection should be contemporaneous; and third, reflection should be critical. Let's begin with reflection's collective nature.

1. Reflection Should Be Collective or Public. Plato had the idea of relationships in mind when, in *Apology*, he quoted Socrates' now famous phrase, "the unexamined life isn't worth living." Although people usually interpret this maxim as a call for introspection, it actually means that we need to discuss our life's experience and meaning with others. As human beings, we learn about ourselves in relation to others through language; communication allows us to validate our behavior.

In reflection, we examine others' responses to our actions to determine if our participation in our social communities has been helpful. Accordingly, our self is formed as much from how others respond to us as from what we do. The self, then, is linked to the social communities that give it definition.

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The process of reflecting together and sharing our individual insights in the safe presence of trusting peers constitutes a learning dialogue. The data that come out of these exchanges often involve the interpersonal dynamics at play; when these are acknowledged and dealt with, true inquiry and insight emerge. Learning dialogues also serve to create mutually caring relationships.

2. Reflection Should Be Contemporaneous. Reflection should also be contemporaneous, that is, it should occur in the moment. For example, a team is just about to launch an advertising campaign featuring a comic depiction of a bumbling old man. At seemingly the last moment, a member chimes in with the comment: "It appears as if we have made our decision. But even though it feels right to me, I still have a nagging reservation that the scene may come across as offensive. What would you say to our taking one more look at it? I'm afraid we may have overlooked something." This "reflection-in-action" can help a group reframe standard ways of operating so as to see experience in a different light.

Other forms of reflection relating to time serve different needs. *Anticipatory reflection* occurs prior to the experience, often in the form of planning, as learners suggest to themselves and to their peers how they might approach a given situation. In *retrospective reflection*, an individual or group recalls a recent experience, often with the goal of assessing or evaluating it so as to gain insight for future tasks.

3. Reflection Should Be Critical. Finally, reflection must be critical. When reflection engages our critical consciousness, it probes to a deeper level than trial-and-error experience. It leads to "double-loop" and "triple-loop" learning, both of which seek to go beyond habitual approaches to problem-solving. In double-loop learning, we challenge our assumptions about the applicability of learning from one context to another. In triple-loop learning, we learn about the "context of contexts" as we question the entire frame of reference for approaching an issue.

Consider an example: Executives often assume that, in order for their companies to stay lean and productive and to cut costs, they need to reduce headcount. A traditional, single-loop approach to the issue would be to research how to rationally restructure the company; i.e., lay off workers across-the-board, concentrate on weak operating units, rely on natural attrition, or make specific cuts. Double-loop learning would involve questioning the assumption to begin with that layoffs will improve productivity. Finally, triple-loop learning might address why executives auto-

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matically turn to reductions-in-force or restructuring as the set of usual alternatives whenever they are concerned about productivity.

Putting Reflection into Action

Acknowledging the importance of collective, contemporaneous, and critical reflection can help us understand its contribution to ethical inquiry. Through civil discourse about the values that drive the choices we make, we can begin to reach agreement about the standards our organizations should uphold. Critical consciousness enhanced through public reflection helps us recognize the connection between individual problems and the social context within which they are embedded. Once learners make this connection, they acquire intellectual humility, empathy, and courage to challenge standard ways of operating. They learn to consider data beyond their personal taken-for-granted assumptions and begin to explore the historical and social processes that foster universal ethical principles.

Let's consider the hypothetical case of Charlie, a young professional who was considering whether to accept employment in a military laboratory known to sponsor research in biological warfare. Charlie considered this form of research reprehensible, but the offer was lucrative. With the money, he would be able to start to pay off nine years of student loans and contribute to a critical transplant operation that could save his mother's life.

Charlie contemplated the offer for nearly two months without coming to a decision. The pros and the cons seemed to balance each other out. Fortunately, he was able to call on the wisdom of an informal group of colleagues that had met casually after work for two years. Although the group originated as a social gathering, it soon became a support network in which people felt free to reveal personal and professional problems for deep consideration by the others.

Charlie introduced his dilemma, and the group helped him work through the decision. His colleagues listened intently to his predicament and offered their support as well as a range of possible solutions. Although some had strong views about the laboratory's mission, they were most concerned about helping Charlie think through the countervailing ethical principles that could ultimately guide his decision. For example, how would he balance the utilitarian value of possibly saving his mother's life against the destructive use of the weapons he would be contributing to producing, not to mention the drain on his own conscience? His colleagues also probed a number of Charlie's assumptions; for example, whether the lab's agenda could be reformed or whether he was the only source of funds for the transplant operation.

We see in this example that Charlie was able to use all three aspects of reflective practice: his thought process was public, contemporaneous (as well as anticipatory), and critical. Likewise, human resource departments can design practice-oriented learning experiences to emulate the conditions reported in this example. For example, facilitators can assemble learning teams to help employees inquire collectively with their peers on matters of personal and professional consciousness. They can build reflection into learning experiences using techniques such as learning histories, after-action reviews, or group dialogue.

To ensure its practice in day-to-day management experience, coaching may be needed to encourage individuals to develop their insight by becoming mindful of why things occur in a certain way, scrutinizing differences between others' perceptions and their own perception of self, becoming curious about how forces below the surface shape actions and outcomes, examining discrepancies between what is being said and what is being done, or just becoming open to feedback from others. By adopting a minimalist intervention style, coaches and facilitators can permit learners to manage their own process of self-discovery.

In this way, employees such as Charlie can learn to cope with real ethical dilemmas that can have both personal and professional consequences and, with the support of others, bring those issues into public dialogue. Such dialogue can go a long way toward preventing the erosion of integrity that has plagued the corporate world in recent years. ◘

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