

PROSCRIPTIVE ETHICS (DOS AND DON'TS) UNDERMINING ETHICAL CULTURE IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Dr. Mike Ryan Rawls College of Business Professor of Practice: Leadership and Ethics

I study leadership and ethics, and that's the area I've been teaching in for the most part. My approach to ethics is very action oriented. I speak to this with my students. I speak to this with other organizations I do workshops for. Ethics as an area of study is extremely interesting but from a business perspective, until we implement something, until we follow through on something, it's simply an area of study. My approach is very much one where I ask the question "what are you going to do about it?"

The four areas I'm going to talk about are descriptive, proscriptive, prescriptive, and moral relativism. Descriptive is simply "what is" and a lot of times we look at ethics, and we look at the situation that currently exists and that's a descriptive standpoint. Proscriptive is what's forbidden. That includes the whole system of codes and rules and policies that are codified and that tell us what we can and what we can't do. Prescriptive is 'what do we want?' What's the desire? What's the ideal? What ought we be doing? And then moral relativism refers to how culture influences ethics. What part does it play in the role of ethics?

When we talk about 'descriptive' that's when we hear things like "this is the way it's always done", "this is the way we do it here." Right away it's a cut off. It limits the actions we can take. Proscriptive goes even further. It is based on policies and rules, and it tells us what can and what can't be done. When we talk about what is prescriptive, all of the sudden we have to start recognizing our own obligations, our duties, our responsibilities. And this requires a much higher level of engagement. For moral relativism, we have to bring in ethics and how it relates to the prevailing culture.

In terms of threats, when we talk about descriptive ethics, we get the response of "well, that's not my fault" "that's the way it's always been done," which is a built-in excuse. Proscriptive is not much better. It speaks to the issue of "I was following orders," "this is what they said I had to do" And in fact, some researchers mention that when you act, especially in business, if you act as a manager on a policy and rules and something is determined as unethical, it's not your fault; it's the fault of whoever wrote the policy and rules. That's a threat to ethics because it takes ethics away from the individual.

Both of these, proscriptive and descriptive, remove the ethical component from the individual's actions.

In prescriptive, we have to be engaged. Aristotle developed the prescriptive and the whole concept is that we not only have to study, we also have to deliberate. We have to build our cognitive awareness and then act. He said that ethics without action was not of value. And when we look at moral relativism, and I put this as a threat, some people use that relativism to justify decisions. It shouldn't be used to justify decisions, it should be used to grow awareness of other communities, of other perspectives.

The foundations of ethics are going to be fairly universal. So, when we talk about prescriptive, one of the things I reinforce constantly when I'm teaching, is that we have to own our decisions. We can't say "well so-and-so told us". I don't care if that so-and-so is a professor, a preacher, a politician, it doesn't matter. We can't pass the buck. Ethics should be very personal. It shouldn't be blind acceptance. We need to investigate, we need to research, we need to develop our own thoughts on it, and not do so lightly. It requires cognitive engagement. You do have to do some study and research. Don't just take things at a superficial level, carry it to the next stream. Ask yourself, what does it imply in terms of my obligations, my duties to myself and to others who are involved?

Bounded rationality is the concept of our being able to speak to those things that we know, or to those things that we can learn, dependent upon time. Ethics requires that we expand our bounded rationality. It requires that we seek to learn from various studies from others and grow that bounded rationality. And lastly, ethical decisions, from a prescriptive standpoint, require that we accept consequences. If I disagree with a law, or I disagree with some policy, and I act on that, I should be fully aware that I have to accept the consequences of it. Because that's part of my growing as an individual and sometimes the consequences can be severe. You might challenge a policy at work and lose your job. But if you retain your own, ethical values, I don't think you've lost anything. I would challenge each and every one of us to constantly ask the question: are we simply doing it because somebody else said that we have an excuse? Or are we willing to take the extra steps and engage ourselves in the decisions that we're making? That to me is what ethics is fundamentally about.