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BOOK REVIEW

ETHICS IN THE WORKPLACE: TOOLS AND TACTICS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

By CRAIG E. JOHNSON

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (2007)

Paperback, 334 pages

Reviewed by Arne P. Nielsen

It is virtually impossible to listen to a news report, read a newspaper or magazine, or surf the Internet without the focus involving a scandal in government, a corporation, an organization or institution. The recent home mortgage collapse and the freezing up of credit markets around the world left taxpayers paying for cleaning up the financial mess caused by the immoral actions and greed of business leaders. It has only increased the already intense concerns about improving the moral behavior of organizations and those who run them. Many of our nation's elite corporations have ethical codes of conduct and code books to direct them. Unfortunately, often the leaders of these organizations either don't know how to implement their policies or, worse yet, may not believe in them. For this reason Johnson calls for an ethical transformation of organizations. *Ethics in the Workplace: Tools and Tactics for Organizational Transformation* is his attempt to provide organizations and their leaders and followers with tools that will help them place "ethics at the center of the workplace, significantly altering attitudes, thinking, communication, behavior, culture, and systems" (p. xv).

His book is a roadmap for those who have the courage to implement significant long-lasting positive change in their organizations. Chapter One introduces five common ethical theory approaches found in organizations, which Johnson applies later throughout the book. He encour-

ages individuals to apply more than one theory to an ethical dilemma, allowing leaders to test their perceptions through five lenses. The five ethical theories he brings forward for application include Utilitarianism (choosing the option that involves the greatest good for the greatest number of people), Kant's Categorical Imperative (the act of doing what is morally right no matter what the consequences are), Rawls' Justice as Fairness (the idea of balancing freedom and equality), Communitarianism (the concept of a community promoting shared moral values), and Altruism (the goal of taking care of others first). Johnson makes it clear that all of these approaches have both strengths and weaknesses, "but each makes a valuable contribution to moral problem solving" (p. 22).

Johnson asks the question, "Is it bad apples or bad barrels" that are responsible for corrupt organizations? He believes that both bad apples (individuals) and bad barrels (organizations) each play a part in ethical failure. Both are in need of transformation. He introduces five elements of personal ethical development: facing the shadow side of the personality, discovering vocation, identifying personal values, developing character, and drawing upon spiritual resources. His concept of a shadow side of individuals, borrowed from the psychotherapist Carl Jung, refers to the side of us that is embarrassing and highlights our shortcomings. When ignored or repressed, this shadow side puts leaders at great risk to themselves and the organizations they lead, because they show up under pressure or in unconscious processes such as projection of undesirable characteristics unto others. For this reason Johnson believes that this dark side of individuals needs to be confronted. First, by acknowledging (admitting) its existence, our shadow side begins to lose its hold on us. Second, by looking at this shadow side, we see more clearly who we really are. Third, by knowing we have shortcomings, we become more empathetic towards others. Fourth, by reflecting, we will become better role models. Fifth, by showing others our weaknesses, we give others hope and courage, thereby improving our work relationships.

He concludes his thoughts on personal ethical development by discussing advanced change theory, believing it unethical and unproductive to try and change people from the outside in. He states that "the direction of organizational change is from the inside out, starting with the individual and spreading outward" (p. 53). He believes that just one ethical person within an organization can bring about system-wide change.

Because “very bright people make very stupid mistakes” (p. 66), Johnson spends several chapters discussing decision-making models and approaches. He builds on James Rest’s idea that moral choice involves moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character by action. He revisits the idea of a dark side of our personalities and asks us to be weary of those contributors to (defective) poor decision making, e.g., insecurities, greed, and ego. He introduces us to guidelines for assistance in making improved moral decisions. He reviews several models for decision making, including Kidder’s nine ethical checkpoints.

Johnson emphasizes the centrality of communication in the transformation process. Key is the understanding that listening is more important than speaking. He admonishes us to be aware of those around us, acknowledging them and giving them value. We should be cognizant of those in our sphere of influence and Johnson reminds us that “the exercise of influence is not an option in the workplace. We must influence others if we are to fulfill our roles” (p. 115). He reminds the reader that there can be danger in having a position of influence or power leading to unethical behavior. We should use power judiciously and as Johnson states, “seek to serve others, use positional power with caution, be open to influence, and empower others” (p. 136).

The way organizations are doing business is constantly changing. Groups and teams are more involved in decision making than in the past. Since groups “tend to bring out the moral best and worst in us,” Johnson suggests that a group’s effectiveness increases when someone in the group has the courage to “stand alone” and express a minority opinion. This effectively eliminates the phenomena of group think. Johnson states that “leaders deserve a good deal of the credit for transforming ethics and a good deal of the blame when groups fall short” (p. 171). In his other book *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow*, Johnson (2009) states that “ethics is at the heart of leadership” (p. xvi), underscoring the burden and vital role that leaders play in groups. Both books identify many of the moral demands that both leaders and followers must adhere to. He also explores several leadership theories (styles) that enhance the performance of leaders and heavily involve followers in the decisions making process.

Johnson recognizes that often there is a dark side to organizations that needs to be confronted through truth telling. He encourages leaders to be on guard for seeking truth that leads to greater accountability

to decrease hostile working environments, sexual harassment discrimination, prejudices, and stereotyping. He gives practical solutions for each of these. Central to this is adhering to and promoting a formal code of ethics, a powerful mission and vision statement, shared values, and easily understood norms that support policies. Leaders need to be aware of the organization culture (climate) and be ready to change or modify behavior that is undermining the success of the organization. Johnson advances the idea that “ethical values are factored into every organizational activity” (p. 248). He expresses the need for “ethical consistency” throughout the organization, top to bottom. This includes the concepts espoused by Thomas et al. in their book *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment* (1994) and the need to “think globally” and “act locally.”

There are numerous strengths in this easy-to-read book. First, Johnson provides a plethora of current and historical world events to engage the reader and illustrate and apply concepts. These applications enhance the link from theory to practice and show what he is trying to promote in organizational ethics.

Second, there are boxes or sections termed Case Study, placed throughout the chapters as well as at the end of each chapter. These case studies, real or fictional, engage the reader to decide (make choices) about how they would act or react under the circumstances described. Discussion Probes at the end of the case study bring the reader deeper into the discussion and forces him to make ethical or moral decisions. It appears that Johnson wants the reader to begin practicing moral and ethical decision making along the journey.

Third, Johnson introduces “tips” for the reader to consider in the transformation process. These tips are intended to provide the reader with an idea of how to manage or implement a new concept or technique. In other words, take those that apply and discard those that don’t. The advice provided is a great starting point for the individual who does not know where to begin.

Fourth, each chapter has a Self-Assessment Box. This is an opportunity for the reader to “look in the mirror” and measure her ability or performance. The reader may decide to measure the organization she works for, or if it is more comfortable, insert someone else’s name. (But of course, ethics is always best done on oneself).

Fifth, at the end of each chapter there is a section called Application

Projects that allows the reader to apply what he has just learned through practice, reflection, discussion, writing and other methods for growth and transformation. These application projects are designed for the individual or group and are ones that I found to be especially helpful.

Johnson includes a brief discussion on three approaches to leadership—transformational leadership, servant leadership, and relational leadership. For him these are important normative leadership theories because they set the tone for leader actions, help leaders manage ethical responsibilities in the workplace, and assist leaders with developing principles of right and wrong and a system of moral values.

In his chapter on Ethical Decision Making and Action, Johnson seems to imply that one should find a format or checklist to go through when making important ethical decisions. I do agree that there should be a systematic way of dealing with an ethical dilemma and decision. However, I would argue that many important ethical decisions that we make need to be done expeditiously. Often, we do not have time to check off the steps to consider. I would suggest that a leader can and should be able to make an ethical decision almost automatically.

Another area of slight disagreement is in discussing how to exercise ethical influence. He states that “while we don’t have much choice as to whether or not we exert influence, we do have control over how we go about modifying the behavior of others” (p. 116). I believe we do have a large degree of choice as to whether or not we exert influence. My days are filled with opportunities at home and work where I have to make a conscientious decision about how much influence, if any, I will exert. I believe that everything we do involves choices.

Johnson’s book is well researched, clearly written and practical in its usefulness to leadership. It is a crucial resource for all leaders who want to improve their moral influence and their organizational ethical practices. His idea that we need to fix ourselves before we try to fix the organization is disturbing precisely because he is right, even from a Christian viewpoint, on this central issue. If Christian leaders are looking for specifically Christian approaches to the many ethical issues Johnson addresses, they will not find them. Even so he seems to ask the right questions and provide readers with a toolbox full of useful ideas. Leaders seeking a framework to guide their behaviors will also find this book a helpful starting point. What may still have to be written is an equally practical text that links the day-to-day issues treated here, and

that any Christian leader faces, to more foundational Christian perspectives Johnson is aware of but does not treat explicitly.

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