Ethics and spirituality in the workplace

The growing role of the business case in reforms

By Tim Freeman, Aylin Kunter, Carlis Douglas and Ian Roper

Abstract

Purpose – *Draws attention to recent broad trends in UK employment regulation that refocus the emphasis in employment rights away from a primary concern with safeguarding collective rights toward a more differentiated approach privileging more individual concerns.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Seeks to explain the reasons and consequences of this development.*

Findings – *Argues that rights are defended on the basis of their ability to secure greater employee motivation and productivity.*

Practical implications – *Explains that this is a business-case defence rather than a requirement for social justice.*

Social implications – *Advances the view that modern Conservatives see society as made up of a broad range of actors and not reducible to state action.*

Originality/value – *Claims that the extension of the minimum period of employment required before an employer may be taken to tribunal to two years, together with a greatly increased fee required to bring a case, mean that cases are much more difficult to make.*

Article type: General review

Keyword(s): Ethics; Employment legislation; Employee attitudes; Employment

Introduction

This paper amalgamates three inter-related presentations at the conference entitled 'Diversity: A practitioner's journey' organised by Dr Doirean Wilson in 2014. Papers addressed issues of employee wellbeing in the context of political and ethical concerns within the workplace and society at large. Dr Tim Freeman, chair of the session, has edited a summary of these papers informed by his own research into Leadership and the workplace.

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We start with spirituality and religion in the workplace (Dr. Aylin Kunter), followed by workplace diversity (Dr. Carlis Douglas) and finally the ethics of employment deregulation (Dr. Ian Roper). We all have a desire to understand how we can make the workplace 'better' for those who engage with - and rely on - it for their livelihoods and, increasingly, as a source of identity.

Spirituality and religion in the workplace

Individuals variously experience the "meaningfulness" of work, interpreting their working lives against ethically-infused expectations.

These ethical dimensions are themselves framed in relation to broader secular, mystical or religious perspectives – each of which makes assumptions of the value of work, its purpose and its relationship to personal identity.

Thus while the financial benefits derived from work are important in securing individuals' endeavors, the meaningfulness of work will also depend on its degree of congruence with:

- an individual's personal beliefs;
- its ability to provide structure, purpose and fulfilment to people's lives; and
- its capacity to engender and sustain positive identities which people are free to enact.

Delegates at a conference named a "Diversity: a Practitioner's Journey", held at Middlesex University, London, learned that, at its best, the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of work may align in highly paid, secure employment which affords individuals ample opportunity to engage in activities congruent with their ethical values, enabling them to enact a personal identity with opportunities for development and growth and which they experience positively.

However, it is all too easy to imagine incongruities between personal expectations of work and the realities of its lived experience. Indeed, dissonance between personal and workplace values may be experienced as deeply unsettling, leading to a wide range of practices designed to safeguard the personal integrity of those involved, underscored by antipathy, resistance and even – ultimately - exit.

Diversity in the workplace: surviving or thriving?

The desire to be yourself, while also fitting in, may be experienced as a site of tension by those whose values or identities are not recognized in their organizations. Research into the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic people at middle and senior levels of management indicates that organisations are often blind to practices of discrimination – whether on the grounds of: race; ethnicity; gender; age; disability or sexuality. This makes acknowledging such experiences increasingly difficult, and some, therefore, adopt a variety of different coping strategies, including the adoption of multiple identities.

The exposition of personal narratives can be powerful in developing an understanding of the experiences of "marginalized others" in organizations. However, a further challenge is to support movement beyond coping, or 'surviving', to thriving - in adverse circumstances.

The ethics of employment deregulation

Recent broad trends in UK employment regulation refocus the emphasis in employment rights away from a primary concern with safeguarding collective rights toward a more differentiated approach privileging more individual concerns. Consequently, rights are defended on the basis of their ability to secure greater employee motivation and productivity. This is a business-case defence rather than a requirement for social justice.

This shift was evident during the New Labour era in Britain, from 1997 to 2010, when greater workforce flexibilities were defended in terms of their potential for a positive impact on work-life balance. Individuals were encouraged to exercise new extensions to paternity and maternity rights - equity in the Aristotelian sense of treating dissimilar cases (parents) differently (from those without children).

Following the election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, considerable continuity remained in the rhetoric of employment law deregulation. While still in opposition, Conservative leaders sought to challenge the accusation that they were the natural mouthpiece for big business with regard to employee rights by redefining the nature of the relationship between state and society.

In essence, the Conservatives took the view that, while there was such a thing as society (a previous Conservative prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, had famously said that there was not), it consisted of a broad range of actors in a "big society" and was not reducible to state action.

Coalition government reforms to employment tribunal law exemplify the rhetoric of deregulation. The logic of the business case suggests that happier, more flexible staff are less likely to seek redress and thus there is less need for expensive tribunal cases.

However, extension of the minimum period of employment required before an employer may be taken to tribunal to two years, together with a greatly increased fee required to bring a case, mean that cases are much more difficult to make.

Attribution of the recent massive drop in the number of cases taken to employment tribunals solely to a happier workforce is thus questionable. The implication is that, despite the rhetoric of "flexible but fair"', it may be much more difficult to seek redress for inequities related to harassment, equal pay and no-fault dismissal.

Note

Dr Tim Freeman is associate professor of leadership and organisations, Dr Aylin Kunter is lecturer in Organisation studies, and Dr Ian Roper is associate professor in HRM (all in the department of Leadership, Work and Organisation). Dr Carlis Douglas is CEO of Thriving |Peoples.