Building Ethical Resilience:
The Role of Educational Institutions

Hema Harsha*

Abstract

The ancient adage "as you sow, so shall you reap"is an insight into the future based on the current efforts. Triumph is when one reaps the positive benefits of the endeavour, be it a simple action of empowering an under privileged,or conducting business legally and ethically. Unfortunately in today's highly competitive environment, beginning from their formative years, what one sees in practice, is contrary to what is said and taught. This dichotomy in words and actions poses challenges in the choice of ethical route to be institutionalized within an individual. The dynamic business environment is another major challenge to conduct business ethically and create one's own niche position. Where lobbying, corruption and bribery is on a rampage, educational institutions should take the lead in fostering an ethical environment in prospective leaders of tomorrow's businesses and ensuring the beacon directs them in an ethical path.

The conflict of ethics and profits in a business environment is as old as recorded history, and challenges the ethical barometer of both institutions and individuals alike. India's corporate world needs dynamic and righteous workforce which will not just prove to the world that they too exist, but also iterate that we live up to the great philosophies taught by Swami Vivekananda who said "If the whole world stands against you sword in hand, would you still dare to do what you think is right?". Educational institutions have a major role to play in developing this robust pool of virtuous human resource while building ethical resilience which is the need of the hour.

Key Words: *Educational Institutions, ethical resilience, business.*

Introduction:

The ever demanding work place challenges has put enormous pressure on the work force, so much so that the rate of breakdown under work related stress has gone up in the last couple of years. This pressure to perform has given rise to many ethical violations,

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* Assistant Professor, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's M.P.Birla Institute of Management, Bengaluru 560 001.

especially by the educated and high performing employees across the globe. While there are many factors which influence the behaviour of an individual, the environment in which they are groomed and nurtured in their formative years also contributes in influencing their behaviour over the years. Having said this, the role of educational institutions in moulding the ethical conduct of the future citizens and professionals is worth examining.

In spite of the best of education, individuals fall prey to the temptations of the materialistic world and commit ethical offences. The influence of the environment on the virtues of individuals is so severe that its impact was feared by the ancient philosophers, that they cautioned one against these evils of the work place. The magnitude of the scams and breakdown of ethical confidence has shattered the confidence of the common man, which is in turn threatening the economic growth and prosperity of nations. Hence, there is a need to understand the role played by various institutions in building ethical values and explore options to counter the negative effects of the ensure that the ethical fabric is not punctured.

**The Ethical Dilemma – Principles versus Rules**

No definition of "Ethics" can be complete without relating to moral, conduct, values, rights, and wrongs. Ethics and ethical behaviour cannot be judged in isolation, but should be evaluated in the overall context of the dynamic situation in which decisions are taken. The debate on what is right and what is wrong has been going on since time immemorial.

The ethical dilemma is as old as the subject of ethical behaviour, with innumerable instances across generations, across the world – from Cleopatra's conduct, to Brutus's behaviour including our own mythological epics of Ramayana and Mahabharat. The competing factors which are the root cause of these dilemmas are principles and rules. While principles are abstract guidelines which define a desired state, rules are crystal clear guidelines which are intended to govern conduct and behaviours. It is this option of choices that leads to a conflicting situation. While Lord Krishna never violated principles but broke rules to adhere to principles, Duryodhana, religiously adhered to rules

even at the cost of violating the spirit of the principles based on which the rules were made. On the other end of this scale was Lord Rama, who followed rules while placing the principles on the highest pedestal.

One is faced with many such dilemmas on a regular basis as part of their professional responsibilities, where competing requirements of individual achievement, organizational objectives, and other stakeholders' expectations challenge the ethical judgement of individuals. Ethics, which is mostly about principles of fairness, honesty, and righteousness its application, is relatively easy in transactions of personal lives. It is in the interpretation and application of these rules and regulations that cracks in the ethical behaviour surface, leading to ethical deviations and violations. The interplay of these two components of ethical behaviours is depicted in figure 1 below.

Figure 1 – Interplay of Principles and Rules and its influence on ethical behaviour
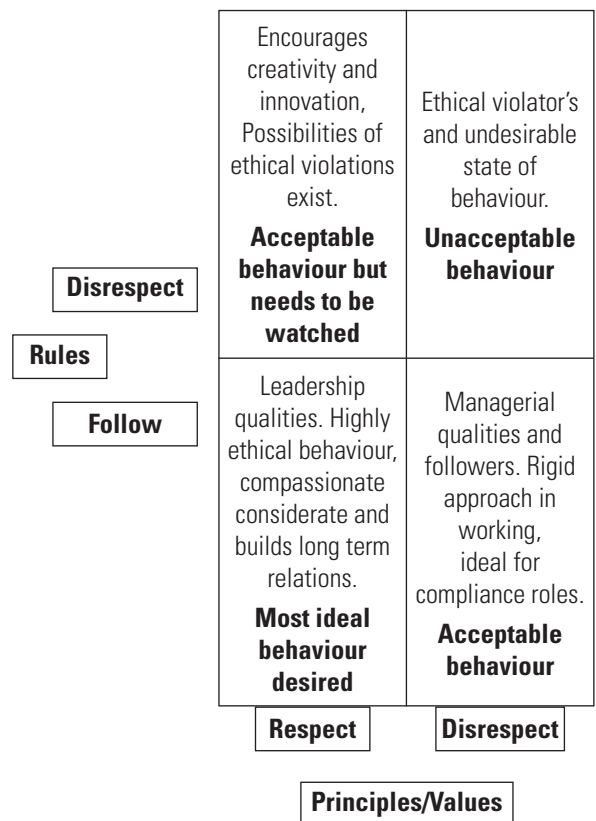
Social Institutions and their role in Building Ethical Values and Behaviour

Ethical values and behaviour is the culmination of the efforts of various players in the eco system in which an individual is born, grows, works and lives. While the influence of each subsystem cannot be undermined, it is the environment in which one is educated that plays a major role in moulding ethical values and behaviours of individuals. When these values are built on strong foundations, the influence of the upheavals of professional work environment is incapable of moving individuals to the state of showing disrespect to rules and principles.

The seeds of ethical values are sowed during the childhood of an individual and are nurtured in the educational institutions. By the time they step out into the work environment, they have formed their views and opinions of the ethical values and how to conduct themselves under various situations. Thereafter, their ethical resilience is subjected to constant quenching and tempering, which tests its strength. The breakdown of these ethical values and perpetration of acts of ethical misconduct occurs as one travels the path in the competitive world and blames everything under the sun, but themselves and their moment of weakness. Unfortunately, most of the time, the approach, and methodology of the three major institutions - home, educational institutions, and professional work place, who contribute in the process of moulding the ethical behaviour of individuals, are at loggerheads and needs to be aligned. The influence of each of these institutions and their contribution in moulding the ethical values of individuals is presented below.

• **Home:** The seeds of ethical character are sowed at home, where, as a child one learns the rights and wrongs of life, experiences the consequences of wrong conduct, and gets a fair opportunity to correct his/her behaviour. Irrespective of the regional affiliations, the contributions of parents, grandparents, relatives and friends in imbibing a strong value based ethical mind set is acknowledged by all. Entertaining children with stories from mythology, interspersed with valuable moral value additions, grandparents would leave a permanent impressions on the tender minds. However, in today's social set up, where nuclear families with both parents working has become the norm of the day, the child is deprived of the benefit of this age old system of elders grooming children to distinguish the righteous path from the other. This break down of the extended family, coupled with the concept of old age homes as an option for elders, and the proliferation of a materialistic culture, has created a void in the transfer of value based behaviour knowledge.

• **Educational Institutions,** Today the journey of a child in the educational arena commences at the tender age of twelve months. From crèches to play homes, to kindergarten passing through school and colleges before they step out into the professional world, they spend maximum time in educational institutions, where they create lasting impressions of ethical standards. This is the place which has the maximum potential to influence the ethical character building amongst all individuals and prepare them as ethically strong individuals before they step into the professional world. The role that an institution can play in the process of building ethical character, which is the subject of this paper, is presented in the later part of this paper.

• **Professional Work Places.** The professional work place, based on circumstances and conduct of other professionals, either reinforces or breaks the foundation of ethical values and principles nurtured by the earlier two institutions. The potential of this institution to shake the very foundation of ethical behaviour has been recognized by philosophers across civilizations and recorded in their teachings. The Greek philosopher, Plato, states that "no matter how good an education they have received, one will not remain wisdom loving, let alone attempt to pursue other virtues (read ethics as one) if they live in an environment that counteracts the effect of their education". On similar lines, the great Indian philosopher of all times, Kautilya, in his book Arthashastra, highlights the impact of work environment on the moral conduct of an individual. To counter any negative influence or unethical behaviour, he recommends that the salary of highest officials should be capable of preventing them from succumbing to the temptations of the enemy or rising in revolt against the throne to satisfy their excessive needs.

An explanation into what drives an individual in taking unethical decisions while in power is emphasised through this.

Major challenges and opportunities for Educational Institutions

Of the three primary institutions which influence the moulding of the ethical character of an individual, educational institutions are the major contributors, since this is the place where an individual spends the maximum time during the earlier years of growth, interacting with a wide range of personalities, forming opinions, and experiences the outcome of their behaviour under various conditions. This when related to the younger generation has a great impact in bringing clarity about what is right and what is not. In the younger days, students see their teachers as role models and that is the right time to embed the seeds on values and principles. Henry Ward Beecher, the American preacher remarked that when young men or women are beginning life, the most important period, is that in which their habits are formed. In ethics there are no shades of grey, only white, or black. During this crucial stage in one's life, when they are grappling to find their position in a competitive environment, educational institutions should step in to imbibe good habits and principles in their lives. An eco-system which enables and fosters ethical values and character is the need of the hour. Building core values first without focus on the returns, not only yields rich dividends in the long run but also builds resilience to face challenges without compromising these core values.

Apart from the mundane issues of honesty, integrity, compassion, fairness etc, two major issues, relevant to educational institutions also, which challenges the construct of ethical fabric,are summarized below.

• **Intellectual Corruption.** The intention of knowledge creation is to improve the lives of individuals in general, and the society at large. However, incidents like plagiarism in academics, and, cyber crimes and insider trading, in corporates to name a few has highlighted the level of intellectual corruption. This erosion of intellectual standards tempts individuals to cross the boundaries of ethical conduct. While these are good case studies for management sessions, restraining the urge to cross the line for personal gains needs to be arrested. While mistakes are bound to happen, how be it identified and corrected is what builds faith in the system of fairness.

Bringing the lessons learnt from these mistakes to eliminate, and not just prevent repetition becomes critical in reinforcing ethical behaviour. Educational institutions should lead the way in reiterating the need of intellectual integrity in the future business leaders by their dealings with the students during their stay in these institutions.

For example, creating awareness about Plagiarism and its ill effects, utilization of knowledge for conducting business activities ethically, ethical decision making etc should be imbibed in students at grass root levels in order to strengthen the pillars of ethical behaviour.

• **Capabilities and Expectation Mapping.** A study on the employment trends in IT and ITES industry in India has reported that of the 1.5 million students who graduate out of the 3393 engineering colleges in India, nearly 70% remain jobless on graduation and of this nearly 30% continue to be jobless even after a year .Another study by the World Bank Group recommends improvement in the skill sets of graduates, and refocus on the assessments, teaching and learning process. The tendency of educational institutions to give false assurances without mapping the capabilities is another serious trend which is catching up, which has the potential to induce one into the zones of grey to overcome the challenges of survival in this competitive environment. Educational institutions, instead of projecting idealistic outcomes, must have a realistic approach in catering to the needs of various categories of students.

Role of Educational Institutions

As explained earlier, it is very important to understand the difference between adhering to rules and regulations and holding on to the principles whilst adhering to rules. This clarity in thought should be imbibed in a person from a tender age as a toddler and should continue to expand its horizon as they grow, to facilitate the skill of balancing principles and rules. In

this journey, educational institutions play a major role in laying the pitch, fostering the thought and enabling an individual. The impact of the events on the mind of students as they undertake the journey through the portals of educational institutions has a far reaching and almost a permanent effect on moulding their ethical traits and character. The impact of the grooming in educational institutions must be so strong, that the routine upheavals of the professional work place and the short term gains must not be able to influence an individual to resort to unethical practices. The opportunities to reinforce the basic values, essential for ethical behaviours are plenty. Educational institutions can take proactive steps in building up a strong system of ethics by emulating such actions and procedures which builds confidence in the students. They are:

• **Build faith in the System.** Play by the rules, with the spirit of the principles in focus. Human beings have the tendency to ape behaviours. The temptation of short term gains by camouflaging ethical violations should be curbed with constructive corrections rather than penal measures. Personal conduct of the entire team will go a long way in reinforcing the faith that ethical behaviour pays in the long run, in spite of temporary inconveniences. Right from having in place procedures for justified and impartial admissions to maintaining transparency in the system and its functioning, educational institutions go a long way in creating the right atmosphere for ethical conduct. Holding up the belief of a common man that educational institutions are temples of wisdom and learning, they can instill the moral responsibility in each and every individual to hold the baton of righteousness for the future generation to follow.

• **Enable critical thinking.** One major factor for ensuring ethical conduct is critical thinking. It enables individuals to analyse the interplay and conflicting demands of principles and rules and to distinguish the greys from the blacks and whites. This will also assist them to modify their behaviour to remain with the boundaries of ethical norms. Critical thinking capabilities will also enable individuals to overcome the psychological traps, which is one of the causes resulting in distortions of ethical behaviours. Every individual goes through ethical dilemmas at various stages in life. Weighing the pros and cons of the situation and then deciding consciously is a fundamental characteristic of critical thinking and decision making. Instilling critical thinking capabilities and ethical resilience in decision making is possible when the students are given a lot of insight about ethical behaviour through training, seminars, symposiums, lectures and discussion forums.

• **Prospect Management.** Educational institutions are the temples where the prospects of the future leaders are given shape. It becomes imperative that expectations are set right based on capabilities and not on any other parameter. Tall promises made to induce patronage to educational institutions and not fulfilled due to inherent limitations of individual capabilities create a disillusion, compelling ethical violations as an option. Setting achievable goals and working towards it should become the philosophy of the institution.

• **Hiring policies.** Teachers and Professors are the most revered personalities in the journey of learning of an individual. As a role model, the conduct of the teachers influences the building of values amongst their followers. While saying this, the onus lies on the educational institutions in hiring teachers with a good ethical behaviour. Selection procedures should include tests and criteria's to test one's ethical resilience. This would definitely set in a precedence to cultivate the environment of a moral turpitude.

• **Compulsory learning.** Ethics as a subject should be introduced from a very young age into an individual's system. Moral science was a subject for children in school. These days with too many options, this subject is done away with and that is defeating the purpose of moral education. Be it a theory class or a training session or as part of flip class, ethics as a compulsory subject should be introduced right from schooling to the top most educational level to ensure reinforcement at various stages.

• **Walk the talk.** Educational institutions are the abode of knowledge and are considered to be the epitome of growth and development. Many in the olden days would give a lot of credit to their gurukul and the gurus. This system has transformed and today everybody is into mudslinging and playing blame game.

Organisations must take that responsibility of building a community with high moral standards. This is possible only when they practise what they preach and vice versa. With many surveys listing out low percentage in the quality of students ready for the industry, onus lies on the educational institutions and the members associated with it to ensure that they fulfil their moral obligation towards the society by delivering quality human resource. By this, a moral obligation and a sense of ethical responsibility is built both within the system and outside as well.

Conclusion

In today's turbulent times, ethical conduct of business leaders is critical not only to restore the confidence of stake holders but also to do business successfully over a sustained period of time. Legendary management guru, Jack Welsh identifies the fixation on results at the cost of values as one of the deadly sins of leadership. Educational institutions, especially, institutions of higher education must take on the mantle of moulding ethical behaviour and values with dedicated focus and more vigour. It is here that the individuals are in a state where they can intellectually challenge the system when they are contemplating the difficult choices of black and white or the easy route of grey. The three factors identified as critical for making a big difference – Law of the few, stickiness factor and the power of context must be leveraged to attain exponential results and propagating the necessity of good values, honesty, and integrity in every transaction of life, personal and professional.

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