

A Discussion of “Through the Looking Glass”

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ethics, organizational, instinct, thinking, feeling, autonomy, organizational culture, congruency, discount matrix, responsibility.

Integrity, in relation to wholeness and morals and ethics, is seen as central to autonomy and a freeing force in people’s lives.
(Mellor, 2008)

Abstract

This paper is a response to Sandra M. Caffo’s (2011) article entitled “Through The Looking Glass: Instinctual and Cultural Influences on U.S. Workers’ View of Ethics and the Workplace.” From a developmental/organizational transactional analysis perspective, the author outlines her frame of reference and explores four priorities: instinct, thinking and feeling, autonomy, and organizational culture in relation to OKness. She highlights the fact that ethical issues are many layered and will be influenced by the organizational culture as well as the current climate. Just as individuals need alignment between thinking, feeling and behavior, in-depth analysis is required to assist organizations to be congruent and to ensure alignment between purpose and actions.

In this article, I cover four aspects that arise from Caffo’s (2011) article on ethics in the workplace as priorities for me: instinct, thinking and feeling, autonomy, and organizational culture in relation to OKness. I do so from a developmental/organizational transactional analysis perspective.

Using the article as a basis for discussion is somewhat difficult because Caffo offers a fairly confused picture, mixing as she does legal and illegal actions with ethics. Of course, these are linked, but they have been conflated, and there are also some leaps of logic and faith. While it is true that people have different beliefs about what ethical behavior is, it is the law of the land that defines what is, and is not, legal. When we consider ethical dilemmas in business, the lines between right and wrong are more difficult to distinguish.

The one-to-one contract within the therapist-client relationship is not the usual experience for an organizational consultant, whose relationships are often complex and sometimes confusing, a reality that has implications for boundary setting. It is, therefore, “vitaly important that the consultant have clear, conscious, and consistent ethical standards” (Garfield, 1993, p61). Ethical behavior thus starts with us, whether we are in-house consultants, trainers, and coaches or outside contractors.

To consider ethics and ethical behavior, we also need to consider integrity and good practice. Good practice is based on beliefs, values, and opinions, from which ethical behavior stems. When we consider ethics within business, we need to consider the organization’s culture because it will set the standards for decision making. In this context, the written and unwritten codes will influence the organization’s decisions and actions.

Beliefs are often unconscious patterned thinking processes and may, therefore, be hard to identify. Our beliefs will affect how we behave and are part of our identity. Therefore, changing either our beliefs or how we view ourselves will affect our actions. This will include who we work with, how we work with them, and whether our behavior is ethical or unethical.

Most commonly, ethics are considered in terms of dilemmas. For example, let us take a real situation in which the director of a charity that rescued children in war-torn areas was approached by an arms dealer who offered to rescue some stranded children whom no one else

had been able to reach. However, the dealer would not rescue the adults who were with them. The charity's director had to make a quick decision with no time to consult anyone else. To make it, he looked at the organization's core aims, mission, and purpose and decided that he would cooperate with the arms dealers because it was either the children or no one at that point. He subsequently wrote to the charity's stakeholders and explained his dilemma and offered to resign should a substantial number of them disagree with his decision. They did, in fact, support him (Leigh, 2009).

In her article, Caffo (2011) asked, "What influences individual behavior when ethical dilemmas occur in organizations?" (p. xx). As transactional analysts, we recognize that these influences relate to script and include, but are not limited to, the person's existential life position and frame of reference. In addition to individual scripting processes, there will also be the organizational culture in which the person works and has worked and/or been educated. The Euhemerus or primal leader (Berne, 1963) of the organization will have handed down expectations and ways of doing things. These will affect all levels of the contract, including the psychological contract about "how things are done around here." Those with a Machiavellian frame of reference are likely to promote a highly competitive mentality that creates intense pressure to be the best, whatever the cost. In such organizations, ethical decisions will be secondary to winning.

Instinctive Behavior and Ethical Decisions

Early in her article, Caffo (2011) hypothesizes that "ethical decisions are grounded in instinctual human behavior" (p. xx). What would an ethical decision look like that was not primarily or fundamentally based on a belief or value? Instinctive behavior is that which is inborn and fixed. If this were the case, this would be the same within and across cultures. If I am under threat, my first priority will be my survival, not how I can be ethical. This is different from the work of Gazzaniga, whose work Caffo refers to later. From the passage Caffo quotes, Gazzaniga's work appears similar to the script concept in transactional analysis; he wrote "that our minds are constantly . . . interpreting events, creating narratives, devising theories in the course of normal waking life. From this ceaseless activity, we develop automatic, intuitive reactions to what is going on around us" (as cited in Caffo, 2011, p. xx). It is important not to conflate "instinctive" reactions with those that are "automatic."

Let us look at Berne's exploration of prenatal influences as a way to consider instinctive and scripted behavior. Berne (1972/1984) wrote about the spider that spins its web "with no possibility of deviation or improvement" (p. 63); this is instinctive. Given this and recent developments in the understanding of the brain, we can see that ethical behavior develops as a result of socialization from birth on. It will be affected by those who played with us, how we played, parental training, and our own spontaneous invention.

Ware (1983) outlined that, in the process of growing up, children must adapt to the surrounding world and may choose one of three possible ways of doing this. They can remain helpless, thereby inviting others to continue taking care of and thinking for them. Alternatively, they might take care of others by trying to please and be helpful. Or, they may choose to be hurtful or rebellious with an attitude of "I'll hurt you" or "You can't make me." Each of these choices has implications for ethical or unethical behavior and are related to script rather than to instinct.

Thinking, Feeling, and Behavior

Caffo refers to Bowen and focuses on automatic reactivity and emotional process. I agree with her that in order to be ethical, we need to be in the here and now rather than using the past. Caffo outlines how it is important not to be subjective but instead to be objective. She writes, "Conversely, the greater the ability to distinguish between thinking and feeling, the more integrated the individual and the more capable of participating at work in an engaged and thoughtful way" (p. 7). While superficially this sounds logical, we need to be careful that we do not interpret this to mean that subjectivity relates to feelings and objectivity to thinking. Thinking, feeling, and action are three different languages, and we need to be "fluent" in all of

them in order to make sense of situations and consider their impact and implications before deciding what to do. To do otherwise is to reinforce “Be strong” cultures. In summary, all actions are enhanced by thinking about our feelings and feeling about our thoughts and then taking action.

Ware (1983) described different ways in which we can relate with other people, each of which depends on what he called the person’s open, target, or contact door. Each person has a different personality adaptation and therefore a different way to relate and make contact. We might be more open to contact through thinking, feeling, or behavior, and this sequence is relevant. Whatever this sequence is, we need to ensure that our “objectivity” is related to how we feel and think about something before we take action. We might consider this in terms of being mindful, that is, taking into account the situation, the implications, and the options for change. When we are able to consider these aspects, as well as ourselves, this leads to autonomy.

Autonomy

As transactional analysts, we promote the concept of autonomy and would agree with Surowiecki (as cited in Caffo, 2011, p. xx) that independent decision making is important. How could it not be? Without independent thinking, we can get sucked into groupthink and be unable to cast new light on an issue.

Mellor (2008) wrote that “integrity, in relation to wholeness and morals and ethics, is seen as central to autonomy and a freeing force in people’s lives” (p182). Berne (1964, pp158-161) outlined three capacities that make up autonomy: awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy, and we can add responsibility to this (Moodie, personal communication, 19 September, 2007). Macefield and Mellor’s (2006) awareness-discounting matrix includes responsibility and is an important and useful development when considering ethical behavior and who is responsible for addressing it.

Further, within organizations, decision making needs to be cocreatively developed to ensure that everyone in the organization is moving in the same direction. This is key in organizations, because ethical behavior, while necessary at all levels of the hierarchy, is imperative within the leadership, where congruency between espoused values and actual practice is necessary for the development of trust and commitment in the workforce. If ethical behavior is seen as not being adhered to, disharmony and alienation will result. This occurred in the United Kingdom as a result of the global recession when those within the banking system and government discounted the need to control spiraling bonus payments to directors. Integrity and ethical behavior, therefore, go hand in hand.

Within organizations there are also sets of beliefs and philosophical premises that can go unquestioned. If employees question and go against the opinion of a strong group, they risk rejection. Once a premise has been established, a whole set of behaviors and a language develop around it. Any dissension is responded to by closing ranks. As a result, some people are given worth while others are experienced as worthless, and a closed system develops. This process is the same for the rhetoric of the shop floor and for a board of directors.

In this way, certain groups, departments, or organizations can be experienced as a way of life, with followers or disciples. Who are nonbelievers to question such a thing? Language can be used in such organizations as a way of ensuring compliance. It becomes the trap and is congruent with the organization and aims to ensure congruence within the ranks.

In terms of organizational congruency, all aspects of the organization need to be positively aligned with each other to ensure an ethically cohesive approach. These areas include, but are not limited to, identity, beliefs, and values; skills and knowledge; the environment; and behavior. I have outlined these areas in the following diagram which outlines the way in which these are linked and interact.

Figure 1 about here
The Organizational Web Model (Anita Mountain, 2004)

The Organizational Culture

When an ethical decision must be reached, it is important to take into account the nature of the

organization in which the decision is being made. To do this, I have integrated Ernst's (1971) OK Corral with Wickens (1995) and Krausz (1980, p21). In summary, we need to explore whether the organization is:

- "I'm OK, You're Not OK," anarchic (Wickens). Autocratic, paternalistic management style; competitive, stressed organizational climate with unilateral problem solving (Krausz). In this type of organization, workers are less likely to take responsibility for their actions, and there is less willingness to report ethical issues.
- "I'm Not OK, You're OK," alienated (Wickens). Ambiguous management style; anxious, insecure climate with reactive problem solving (Krausz). In this type of organization, workers already feel alienated, and any ethical boundary crossing only serves to further this alienation.
- "I'm Not OK, You're Not OK," apathetic (Wickens). Laissez-faire, alienated management style; the organizational climate is apathetic and passive, with no problem solving (Krausz). People are unwilling to address ethical issues, and, if others cross the ethical line, this only serves to reinforce the prevailing apathy.
- "I'm OK, You're OK," ascendant (Wickens). Democratic, participative management style (Krausz). The organizational climate is motivated, respectful, and creative. Ethical problem-solving processes are the norm.

Many organizations use 360° programs that provide honest appraisals and feedback to individuals using a range of people rather than just a supervisor or boss. Such feedback might also be sought from clients, customers, and work colleagues. However, organizations also need to provide themselves with 360° feedback by seeking comments from the workforce on a regular basis. In this way, there are more likely to be opportunities for change in the culture so that people feel valued and supported, with clear boundaries and contracting processes in place. This is then more likely to lead to ethically congruent behavior.

Caffo (2011) refers to the impact of change itself and states that "it is commonly understood that successful stress management involves accurate assessment, one element of which is differentiating real from imagined threat" (p. xx). She goes on to quote Miller (2008), who stated that we seldom have need for fight/flight responses in the workplace so that our "bodies are constantly preparing to do what our minds have no intention of doing" (p.4). However, today, many people are in threatening situations, for example, the police, armed forces, fire fighters, and, increasingly, those in benefits offices who are unable to provide inquirers with the financial support they need. I also have a colleague who works for a fast food chain and who has been commissioned to undertake conflict resolution training because many of the staff are in areas where there is an increased level of violence and aggression toward such employees.

To take the former point about accurate assessment of stress, today's global recession has changed a range of perspectives on stress. If we have been made redundant in our jobs and, as a consequence, default on our mortgage payments, then no matter how accurately we assess the situation, most of us are still likely to be distressed, depressed, and stressed. It is, of course, true that the more resource-full we are, the more likely it is that we develop sufficient resilience to be able to ride out the storm. However, this will depend on how rough the storm is, its duration, and what else is going on in our lives. The longer the stress endures, the harder it is for individuals to continue to utilize their previous ways of managing. Stress is not just about the individual; it is also about what an organization may be doing that is addressing, causing, or contributing to the stress.

I agree with Caffo when she says that the family plays an important role in our individual development. However, we cannot extrapolate that the family has the same or similar components to organizations, which have far more complex structures and systems. We need to be careful how we compare, contrast, and conflate the two. An organization has sets of interrelated subsystems with inputs and outputs. Knowledge and understanding of the structures and systems within an organization are imperative if we are to make effective interventions.

Conclusion

There are many interesting points in Caffo's article that raise correspondingly interesting

questions. For me, however, the thread of her argument is undermined by her mixing of “instinctual” and “automatic,” the overuse of family systems and family dynamics to understand the complexities of organizational life, and the use of examples that conflate ethical issues and legality (e.g., using the work photocopier for personal documentation). Ethical issues are many layered and will be influenced by the organizational culture as well as the current climate. Just as individuals need alignment between thinking, feeling, and behavior, in-depth analysis is required to assist organizations to be congruent and to ensure alignment between purpose and actions.

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