



Green
Herald

www.daonong.com
2009.05.05

先问是非 再论成败

綠公司

[This is the full text of an article that appeared, edited and in Chinese, in the above publication.]

What's Wrong with the World and How to Fix It

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”
Leo Tolstoy

Problems don't happen by accident. Find a significant problem and you will likely uncover an ethical breakdown. By this I mean harmful behavior motivated by dishonest, inequitable or unsustainable thinking. Ethics, or more accurately its antithesis, unethical behavior, is at the heart of most of our crises – economic, social and environmental. Reducing unethical behavior should be a top priority for mankind.

While the relationship between unethical behavior and societal problems has long been recognized, success in reducing unethical acts has been limited; fraud, corruption, pollution and various forms of anti-social behavior are still rampant. Unethical conduct has tainted all professions: medicine, education, sports, politics, business; no walk of life has been spared.

The economic crisis that became evident in 2008 shows that it is not in anyone's interest to be greedy, short-sighted or ruthless. Millions of employees lost their jobs as a result of the global economic crisis. Losing a job is a stressful experience; but the distress does not stop with the individuals directly involved. The anxiety of a prolonged and often unsuccessful job search generates friction among friends and family. As tensions rise children may suffer along with their frustrated, depressed parents. These stresses leave distraught families susceptible to emotional and physical illness. The surrounding community is affected as bills go unpaid and tax revenues decrease causing serious budget problems. The unpleasant consequences are unending.

Our world is a system wherein each part affects all other parts; self-serving acts are inevitably counterproductive and self-defeating. All business and political entities are indelibly linked together; a breakdown in one area can cause a system-wide impact. Before we can fix the damage we must understand why people behave irresponsibly – what part of their thinking process has gone awry?

Beliefs determine behavior. We must, therefore, understand the beliefs that motivate unethical conduct and show how these beliefs undermine personal and societal well-being. In other words, we need to show why some of our most ingrained beliefs are perversions of the truth and then connect cause and effect – erroneous beliefs lead to unethical behavior which leads to impaired relationships which leads to diminished health. Once these connections are recognized it becomes obvious that selfish conduct is detrimental to our welfare.

Two beliefs play a significant role in fostering unethical behavior. First, there is a widespread belief that more money means more happiness. There is nothing wrong with making money. It is foolish, however, to think that wealth is the only path to a contented, untroubled life. Moreover, extensive research over the past 50 years finds that more money does not bring more happiness. In fact, wealth brings its own trials and challenges. According to this research, once a person's basic needs are met more money does little to increase their satisfaction or happiness. Nonetheless, this popular misconception motivates many people to act selfishly in order to try and satisfy this deep longing for happiness.

Based on this "money equals happiness" thesis, wealth accumulation has been a driving ambition for many. Businesses often focus on maximizing short-term shareholder value; other stakeholders are disregarded and long term consequences ignored. Individuals have become similarly obsessed. An inordinate amount of time and effort is focused on "getting ahead" which usually means obtaining a raise, a promotion or a higher paying job. Many find that the result is not more happiness but a meaningless, unfulfilled life.

Another false belief is that everything that exists is separate and autonomous. This belief runs counter to the growing scientific recognition that, at some level, all things are all interrelated and mutually dependent. Despite this more enlightened view, much of the time people act as if all things and people are disconnected and must, therefore, compete frantically with one another. Such behavior engenders fear and suspicion. We fear there won't be enough and we worry that our competitors or even our friends will outsmart or undercut us. This fear distorts our view of self-interest and leads to the rationalization that selfish behavior is okay or even "normal." Immediate gratification becomes the principal means for maximizing personal satisfaction.

Fixing the ethical problem

There needs to be a heightened awareness of the connection between unethical behavior and individual and societal problems. The 2008 economic crisis offers a vivid example of the devastating effects of engaging in dishonest, unfair and reckless activities. We must ensure that the connection between unethical conduct and society's problems is indelibly etched on the minds of future generations. We can start by teaching our citizens the value of living ethically. In fact, ethics instruction must be an integral part of the education curriculum at the earliest possible age. Language, science and math are vitally important but without a complimentary grounding in morality, these skills can be used to thwart a sustainable way of life. It is no mistake that some form of the Golden Rule has been part of every culture for thousands of years. Young students can be taught the practicality of this simple statement so that their every decision reflects this profound ethical masterpiece.

Colleges and universities must be encouraged to make ethics a mandatory subject. Using case studies and other teaching modalities, ethical principles can become an integral part of every course. Whether a student wants to pursue a career in science, accounting or engineering a solid ethical foundation is crucial for establishing respectful, harmonious relations in or out of the workplace. Unless serving the common good is seen as a high priority a rewarding and satisfying life is unlikely.

Adding ethics to the curricula of schools at all levels, however, is not the entire solution. Ethics education requires a radically different way of thinking from that common to most of our institutions; educational, financial, political and cultural. We must begin by moving from linear thinking to systems thinking.

Linear thinking, which still dominates most thought, mistakes symptoms for the disease and, therefore, tends to result in reactive, quick-fix solutions. Linear thinkers are likely to blame greed (excessive risk taking to garner a bigger bonus or larger profit) and impatience (buying an expensive house or car before financial resources are adequate) as two primary causes of the recent economic meltdown. These behaviors, however objectionable, are only symptoms or effects of a misguided belief that more money or a bigger house will lead to more happiness. Misguided beliefs about how to achieve happiness, not greed or impatience, were the root cause. More importantly, because the underlying belief was false the results were often the opposite of what was intended: jobs were lost, income reduced, home values declined and properties were foreclosed.

Systems thinking recognizes that everything is intertwined and all parts function as a whole; it more accurately depicts human interactions and personal relationships. Personal relationships are crucial to ethical decision-making. Educational institutions must increase the use of the systems approach to teach students the importance of these relationships so honesty and fairness become commonly-held values that can withstand the test of time.

Most organizations recognize the advantages of embedding ethical principles into their culture, not strictly for altruistic reasons but because it is essential to achieving sustainable prosperity. Adhering to ethical principles enhances an organization's reputation, improves customer loyalty and increases employee productivity. Law suits, turnover and health care costs are all minimized. An ethical enterprise is a thriving enterprise. The well-being of all stakeholders and all organizations becomes part of an interconnected whole. To create an ethical culture corporate training must be transformed. The traditional command and control approach to ethics training, with its long list of dos and don'ts and its rarely-observed code of conduct is ineffective. Employees need to see that they receive direct and incalculable benefits from fair and honest dealings. Only then will ethical practices become organic and self-sustaining.

In an interconnected world people must trust one another; ethical conduct is essential. In an interdependent world we all must take responsibility for our actions. Until we are convinced that our interconnectedness makes unethical conduct inimical to what we desire, the problems we have created and the pain they cause will continue to plague us. Now is the time to make ethics education and training a priority at every level of learning.

"We are what we think; with our thoughts we make the world."
Buddha

David A. Schwerin, Ph.D. is author of two books and numerous articles that have been published around the world. His most recent book, *Conscious Globalism: What's wrong with the world and how to fix it*, was published in China by Social Sciences Academic Press. David has been a visiting professor at Tianjin University of Commerce and an editor of Seeking Truth, a publication of Heilongjiang University, in Harbin China. Dr. Schwerin is the President of the Institute for Ethical Awareness.