

Is there a place for ethics in the library?

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Biography

During the course of his teaching career, Jeff Herd has been employed in large senior high schools in metropolitan and country areas. His passions include integrating technology into student learning and working with students as they engage in constructivist learning. The issue of ethics first raised its head during the course of post-graduate studies, which prompted a closer look at leadership within the context of the rapidly evolving school environment.

Abstract

The global move towards introducing competition, flexibility and the encouragement of new ideas has raised the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership as an important topic for exploration. Given the complex issues and competing forces that challenge leadership in what is predominantly a values-based environment, all leaders within the school, especially those within the library, have a similar responsibility of being effective ethical leaders to teachers, students and the school community as a whole.

Introduction

During the past decade, a growing number of ethical scandals have emerged in many professions and organisations, ranging from the kickbacks from the Australian Wheat Board involvement with Iraq to the ongoing case of James Hardie and asbestos. In both these cases, the issue of ethics in business was overshadowed by greater business concerns, as stated by The Australian (2006), which reported: 'But as far as powerful people in AWB were concerned, the rules did not apply to them ... their sole responsibility was to sell as much wheat as they could ... and pocket hefty pay packets.' Members of the public are becoming concerned with the erosion of moral standards in the name of bolstering company profits or for the purpose of achieving other specific outcomes. Relating this issue to the area of education, the decisions being made by school leaders across all levels within schools are under greater scrutiny by the public and members of the whole school community.

Schools now operate in a rapidly changing social, economic and political context, as education moves towards devolution with its downward thrust of responsibility and

decision making to teachers. This objective – which aims to produce competition, introduce flexibility and encourage new ideas – has raised the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership as important topics for exploration. Even at the micro level of a school library, the leader's responsibility is complex and multi-dimensional, grounded less in technical expertise than in simple human integrity. All staff members have to weigh up the consequences of their everyday decisions and decide which course of action is most right, given the knowledge to hand at the time. All leaders within the school, including those within the library, have a similar responsibility of being effective ethical leaders to teachers, students and the school community as a whole. This is understandable given the complex challenges and competing forces that challenge leadership, which is clearly a values-based activity. Recent times have also seen the issue of ethics and decision making relating to educational contexts attracting more interest from many quarters (Cranston 2002).

The ethical dilemma for school leaders is not a choice between right and wrong but between two rights, which highlights the need for deliberately moral leadership within a school and a library. Leadership needs to be viewed as an exercise in making decisions based on a set of strong personal beliefs and principles by individuals who have a strong grasp of values (Wilson 2003). School leaders at all levels, including leaders within libraries, have come to recognise that in addition to carrying out a series of bureaucratic functions such as delegating, communicating, setting goals and consulting widely, effective decision making demands a set of personal ethical responsibilities. Modern times that demand an increase in performance have created a race to gain a competitive edge, at times pitting colleague against colleagues. This pressure often overshadows social justice and the objective of achieving the common good. The slogan put forward by Nike, Just do it, is not always appropriate and the need for making fair, just and socially responsibility decisions is now more important than ever (Burke 2000).

Toward a general theory of ethical leadership

Leadership, in the broadest sense of the term, encompasses behaviours that are ethical as well as those that are generally considered unethical. Large organisations such as educational institutions consist of individuals interacting with each other on a daily basis and it is the people within organisations that create the degrees of conflict, more than the actual situations that arise (Adams 1976). This raises the question, 'Does the end justify the means?' Poor leaders have often achieved their goals by misinforming their followers, through making false claims to justify their actions as they base their actions on the convenient point of view that the final result is all that matters. Unethical behaviour is but only one item in the toolkit that poor and ineffective leaders use to accomplish their goals. Other tools include outright lying, deception, withholding some or all information and the bullying of subordinates, both openly and covertly.

It could be stated that ethical leadership is an essential ingredient for a library to operate effectively, as the teacher-in-charge demonstrates ethical judgment in dealing with all staff, as well as students, not only to ensure their wellbeing but also to act as a role model. Contemporary leaders must recognise and understand the difference between ethics and the law, where ethics relate to a code of morality embraced by a particular person or group and the law is recognised as a system of rules that governs the general conduct of a particular community (McCrimmon 2007). Unfortunately,

educational practice does not take place in a vacuum – it exists in an environment that has a high degree of interconnectedness among its many components. As the components themselves rapidly change, the environment sometimes becomes turbulent. School environments, especially libraries, are characterised by decentralised patterns of influence and authority and low division of labour. This results in the conveying of expertise and advice rather than commands or decisions and often relies on professional judgment rather than detailed rules and a sense of teamwork for a common goal.

Issues

Difficulties arise in the assessing or recognising of poor ethical behaviour, especially when leaders can justify their actions through making false claims, perhaps even to the point of misinforming their colleagues, or through basing their actions on the view that the end justifies the means. As long as success is defined by results and we do not monitor or analyse the underlying decision-making behaviour in terms of whether it was ethical or not, it will never be demonstrated statistically that ethical behaviour, whatever its definition, results in better outcomes than unethical behaviour (Rubenstein 2003).

Accepting that there are no laid-down guidelines to rely upon when making ethical decisions, Lashway (1996) suggests that any decision should contain elements of caring and justice, and that those in decision-making roles should possess a fully informed ethical consciousness. Alternatively, the issue that requires attention should be examined from a different perspective, such as considering the manner in which others will be affected by the decision, or how we would like to be treated under similar circumstances. While some decision makers hide behind their position, it has been suggested that ethical behaviour must be a constant companion, not something that is used only in emergencies.

Unethical behaviour demonstrated by leaders can be found in almost every workplace and includes: social isolation of individuals or groups; humiliation; unwarranted criticism; intrusive supervision; and the singling out of individuals for different treatment. While other examples of unethical behaviour can include creating disharmony between co-workers and the deliberate spreading of disinformation, these are often difficult to identify, making it almost impossible to rectify the untenable situation (Clarke 2005).

As recognised leaders within the school, we are faced with making ethical decisions on a daily basis. The challenge of making the correct ethical decision comes in many forms, some very obvious and some in more subtle forms. Making a decision on the form of a new type of sponsorship to increase our budgets or deciding who gets the biggest slice of the budget come under the former, while providing equal opportunities for advancement and professional development for your staff comes under the latter. Does the degree that you interact with individual library staff members determine the opportunities that are made available to them? Does the allocation of duties rely on the relationship between the individual and the leader? Are your opportunities for advancement and a more equitable work load dependent upon whether you are liked by the leader overseeing these tasks or not? Is the level of communication, especially vital career and work-related information, determined by personal relationships rather

than on a needs basis? The ethical question centres on whether all the necessary information is available to individuals or whether it is available only to those who are friends with the leader? Does everyone in your library have equal opportunity to put their point of view forward or are decisions made by a small group of individuals before formal meetings, especially relating to issues that directly affect others and their work environment?

Duignan (2006) recommends that when making any form of ethical decision, it is imperative to obtain as much knowledge as possible about the whole situation, as good ethical decision making depends on the thorough collection and, more importantly, the understanding of these facts. When making a decision that will impact on others, is it necessary to gain an understanding from their perspective, or is it more effective just to make a decision based on your own knowledge? Questions that should be asked when confronted by an ethical dilemma are: what the issue is; who the central players are; why are they involved; and what the available options are. Most importantly, effective leaders who make correct ethical decisions are able and willing to justify their decisions to others, and are able to defend their decisions in the public arena. Schools, especially libraries, are complicated social structures when it is realised that many individuals have their own agendas which influence their actions, whether these agendas are ideological, explicit or implicit. Therefore, it is of vital importance that the leader can publicly demonstrate the rationale behind any decision they make.

The making of ethical decisions should not be characterised by potential conflicting values, such as between school policies and personal values or between the best interests of one individual and another. Leadership is not primarily about making bureaucratic decisions; it is about exercising a set of personal ethical responsibilities. Leadership is an immensely difficult and demanding task but effective leaders have a strong grasp on a set of values that help them make the difficult decisions (Wilson 2003).

Hypothetical

Consider the following:

You are in charge of a school library where it is obvious that one particular staff member is not popular with several other staff, who keep leaving you anonymous reports of infractions they believe she has committed. Bearing in mind the rights of the staff member, how would you handle the situation?

- a. confront the teacher with the information against her
- b. suggest to the accusers that they approach her personally to settle the issue
- c. insist on receiving the names of the accusers before you do anything, enforcing her rights to protection against anonymous accusations.

You are in charge of a school library that is considering purchasing a new automated library system? Do you:

- a. involve all library staff members in the process and respect their input
- b. convey critical information to some staff members but exclude others
- c. work covertly with the deputy to introduce the new system?

While designing the workflow for the coming year, as the person in charge of a school

library, do you:

- a. involve all staff in decisions that affect their working environment
- b. set impossible deadlines for staff to achieve without consultation
- c. manipulate staff levels at short notice without sufficient explanation?

As teacher-in-charge of a school library, you attend the weekly senior staff meetings at which whole school decisions are made. Do you:

- a. distribute all the minutes and provide a detailed account of events to all your staff
- b. convey critical information to those staff members you like
- c. keep the information to yourself?

When asked by others for your opinion of a colleague, especially by administration, do you:

- a. hide their failures where ever possible and concentrate on their positives
- b. distort their performance measures to achieve your own aims
- c. provide an opinion based on your likes or dislikes of the individual?

Conclusion

Real leaders concentrate on doing the right thing, not on doing things right. This statement would come as no surprise to school leaders, whose lives are filled with difficult ethical dilemmas on a daily basis. Lashway (1996) suggests that 'having moral obligations to society, to the profession, to the school board and to students, effective leaders find that it often is not clear what is right or wrong, or what one ought to do, or which perspective is right in moral terms. Unfortunately it is also true that relatively few school leaders have been trained to deal with everyday conflicts.' This kind of conflict is heightened because school leaders are public officials with obligations to many people who often have competing values or interests. Should a student group be able to book an assembly speaker whose views will offend some in the community? Should the principal support a teacher who has made a questionable assessment decision? Is the offer of sponsorship compatible with the aims and objectives of the school?

McCrimmon (2007) goes so far as to suggest that effective leaders employ ethical thinking in all aspects of their role, through working within the statutory laws and policies while developing a trusting working relationship with the whole school community through ethics. Ethical leadership is more than just creating a delicate balance of what is right and wrong; it engages the grey area of opinion and circumstance. Effective leaders display shared values, trust, honesty, fairness, equity, empowerment, human dignity and doing the right thing for every individual, regardless of their personal feelings towards that individual. The whole school community rightly expects those who hold leadership positions to act justly, rightly and promote good rather than evil and that they demonstrate both moral and professional accountability to all those they serve.

Educational practice does not take place in a vacuum, especially in a busy library. Given this, and the fact that these practices exist only in a real context influenced by historical, economic and political considerations, is it any wonder that leaders require some understanding of the political dimension and role of power as they struggle to gain some insights into the problems of building an ethical environment? A brief search of

the West Australian College of Teaching website reveals a code of ethics for the teaching profession that demands teachers show a real commitment to treating students with fairness and dignity as it stresses the moral values of justice and respect. Should we not be treating all staff and students with these same values as promoted by the college (Western Australian College of Teaching 2007)? Ethical accountability is concerned with wanting the best for the whole school community, which includes the colleagues we work with, regardless of any differences of opinion that may exist. Perhaps the final word should go to Lashway (1996) when he suggests that the golden rule should be that we should treat people as we would like to be treated under similar circumstances.

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