

Workplace morals and ethics

Experience, Human Nature



Introduction

Over the past few years, principles of morals and ethics have become an integral part of the cultural structure of the workplace. Thus, most organisations and industry associations now incorporate these principles within their code of practice. The inclusion of these principles is intended to improve the professionalism of the business employees. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how this aid to professionalism is achieved within a property industry environment.

Definition of Morals and Ethics

Whilst the terms “ ethics” and “ morals” have different meanings, both are intrinsically linked. The RICS professional ethics guide (2000) rely on the definition as ethics being the code of moral principles, with morals being defined as the linked to the expected standard of conduct from the individual. When translating this to a business environment, the society have used the term “ *giving of one’s best to ensure that clients interest are properly cared for, but in doing so the wider public interest is also recognised and respected.* ”

However, as a survey carried out by the same organisation (Poon 2004), this code is not unanimously achieved within the property and construction industry, where reduction in ethical standards was perceived by thirty eight percent of the respondents, despite the fact that, when faced with ethical issues, the clients interest were seen as the most important.

Moral and ethical principles in the workplace

Principles of morals and ethics are uniquely connected with the concept of “right and wrong” (Harris and Moran 2000, p. 321) and therefore, one would expect them to be a primary focus for any organisation and its work ethics. Society itself is based upon the maintenance of certain standards which one would expect to be transferred to the workplace (Harris and Moran 2000, p. 7). The same researchers have stated that part of the problems linked with the failures in work ethics can be linked with the way that the media promotes recreation and leisure as more important (ibid p. 235).

Nevertheless, as the public perceptions of standard has moved more towards standards of quality and service in recent years, organisations have begun to focus on the need for the introduction of ethical codes and standards. All organisations, irrespective of whether they are in a commercial environment or not, are performing a public service. The aim is to provide a product or service to the end user that is fit for the purpose, offered fairly without biased, does not offend, is legal and satisfies the demands and expectations of the consumer. For example, within the construction industry this would mean producing a product (a house) that is fit to be lived in and of a standard that householders would expect. In other organisations connected with the property industry, such as surveyors, fairness and honesty in their service is also expected by the consumer. There are numerous incidence where properties have been found unfit, despite assurances of standard from both the construction and property services organisations. Such issues also arise in the public sector. Despite moves towards a “market-oriented” system (Gilroy and Woods 2002, p. 203), consumers still expect standards to be maintained. Harris and Moran (2000, p. 279) state that public service, and

for this can be included any service or product delivered to the consumer, “ is a moral responsibility.”

However, to achieve this position, moral and ethical principles must be applied both all the business stakeholders, both internal and external. This will include suppliers, employees and consumers. If each is treated fairly and ethically, then they in turn will treat others in the same manner.

For example, if a supplier of raw materials is treated unfairly by a construction company, in terms of being pressured to unacceptably reduce prices or wait for payment, in other words treated unfairly, they are likely to feel that it is acceptable for them to treat the construction customer in the same manner. This will reflect on the moral standard the end user receives.

Internally within the organisation, the same scenario would apply. If employees are treated unfairly or unequally, it will affect their working ethic. Unfair methods of the promotional choice methods can often reflect this (Harris and Moran 2000, p. 187). People who are unfairly excluded from promotion will feel that the company has not treated them ethically or equally, which is part of the reason that equality has become a central part of employment laws (Kirton and Greene 2002, p. 201).

Moral and ethical codes can only be implemented if based around a “ culture of dialogue” (Farrell et al 2003, p. 103). As Simon Webley (2001) of the Institute of Business Ethics suggests it is a matter of asking question, of both oneself and others within the organisations. For the instigator of any decision, Webley suggest that they should consider the following points.

- Are the reasons for my decision transparent and is there an objection to others knowing the decision-making process?
- If I make this decision, whom will it affect and will it cause harm?
- Would others consider this decision fair to all who are affected by it?

In essence, it is a question of “ treating others as one would expect to be treated.” Therefore, ethics rely not only upon the behaviour of the individual, but also upon the interaction between groups of people, including management, especially within the workplace (Harris and Moran 2000, p. 14).

An ethical code will have a positive impact in the workplace and the stakeholders attached to it. Taking the example of the construction industry, if a supplier is treated fairly and in the right manner, they will respond in kind, providing a quality of goods and service that will enhance the delivery ability of the constructor. Similarly, if the construction employee is treated with fairness and consideration, they will become more productive in their work and respond in a positive manner to the customer. Lastly, if the constructor takes an ethical approach to the house that they are building, incorporating the right standards and quality, then the consumer will be satisfied. The result of this ethical process being met at all stages is that the business and all connected with it will be satisfied and secure and the organisations involved will achieve economic growth ((Bellamy and Warleigh, 1998: 453-6). Quoted in Mary Farrell et al 2002, p. 114)

Conclusion

As can be seen from this research, the introduction of ethical codes does improve the actuality of fairness and, from the end users view, the perception of standard. Therefore, the employees of the business, in any position, will be considered to be behaving in a more professional manner. It follows that ethical and moral codes are a significant aid to professionalism.

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