Personal Ethics – An Essential Ingredient for Leaders of Tomorrow

We need timeless principles to steer by in running our organizations societies and building our personal careers. We need high standards . . . the ethics of excellence ~   *Price Pritchett*

Ethics as called in Latin is Ethicus and in Greek Ethikos, stems from the word 'Ethos' which means the science of morals. A simple definition of ethics is: "a set of principles of right conduct". Ethics serve as guidelines for analyzing "what is good or bad" in a specific scenario. They create a framework for determining "right" versus "wrong", and represents the core value system for every day problem solving. *Ethics* is the systematic, rational reflection upon a choice of behavior and it can be taught.

Personal ethics are not a conventional set of laws that are passed on from generations by birth; they grow and are crafted over time. Personal ethics are the moral foundation based on values, on which individuals construct their lives. Contributing factors towards its development are; family influence, religious beliefs, culture, personal experiences and internal reflection. Personal convictions and values form the most effective basis for moral and ethical behavior. Many define personal ethics as their inner voice or as 'conscience'.

Can Ethics be taught to our budding leaders of tomorrow? It is heartening for all educationists to note that the answer is an assertive 'yes'. Harvard psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg stated an individual's growth in the ethical dimension happens through three levels, pre conventional, conventional and post conventional. Generally, students in higher learning institutes are adults at the conventional stage, wherein their right and wrong are based on group loyalties: loyalties to one's family, loyalties to one's friends, or loyalty to one's nation. Among the many factors that stimulate ethical development to the next i.e.; post conventional stage, the most critical dynamic is 'education'. Kohlberg's research proved that it made a huge difference when students took courses in ethics, which challenged them to look at issues from a universal point of view and helped promote universal ideals of justice, human rights and welfare. The critical note worthy point here is - there is an interconnectedness of cognitive and moral growth. Ethical development happens over a period of time and ethics can be taught and learned.

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Do personal ethics impact business and social decisions? They most certainly do. The factors that influence ethical behavior are; culture, structural variables like leadership, rewards etc and most importantly the individual characteristics like personal values, ego strength and locus of control. Ethical conduct is influenced by moral intensity, ethical sensitivity and situational influences. Ethical sensitivity requires empathy and being able to construct cause-consequence chains of events. Ethical judgment requires a mature or sophisticated ability to judge actions. Since ethical decisions involve making value judgments, problems arise when individual's personal values are misaligned with institutional or social values resulting in ethical dissonance. When the ethical dissonance involves fidelity to one's promises, the pain is acute. Sound ethical decision making, provides opportunities to affect our own happiness and that of the people around us. This result in peace and happiness that are so threatened in today's tumultuous, ethically-challenged times.

The IPL row, Commonwealth Games, 2G spectrum scandal, land allotment allegations and the Adarsh housing society scam -- the skeletons of corruption keep tumbling out. On the other hand the tremendous support generated for the Jan Lokpal Bill reiterates the demand for an ethical corruption free civil society. But as quoted by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 'Even the most rational approach to ethics is defenseless if there isn't the will to do what is right'. Can we as educationists, faculty and educational heads develop this 'will', within ourselves and our future leaders? All educational stakeholders must determine where they can best influence and engage in the effort of integrating ethics throughout the course, curriculum, and community. Students should be engaged in a process where they can develop a greater self-understanding by introspection on their 'real self ', reflect on their own personal ethics and on the outlook of other students who may have radically conflicting points of view than their own. It would be meaningful to enhance educational opportunities that ensure our students develop concrete personal ethics along with an understanding of various ethical theories. This would provide them with a strong frame of reference. Students should develop skills to analyze situations in terms of different theories to gives them varied ethical perspectives. Educational experiences should present occasions to practice those ethical decision making skills. The most important mandate would be to infuse the courage to give voice to their values. Social scientific research shows that self-construal – 'how people see themselves', has a dramatic effect on their behavior. Therefore,

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it is essential to help students see themselves as future leaders with power and responsibilities who will be able to influence their organization and community and how the power of their personal ethics and ethical decisions can create footprints for a better world.

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