Elite executives in issues management: The role of ethical paradigms in decision making

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Received: 10th February, 2002

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Shannon A. Bowen (University of Houston) focuses on the ethics of issues management from a perspective of Kantian moral philosophy. Her PhD dissertation (University of Maryland, 2000) won the International Communication Association's award for the most outstanding dissertation in public relations. Shannon's research focuses on incorporating a rational, ethical approach into the strategic issues management of organisations. She also worked on Capitol Hill and as a political research analyst (MA, University of South Carolina; BA, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

Abstract

The perspectives of elite (or top-level) issues managers on ethics are explored in this paper. From these elites we can learn how issues were managed at their global organisations and how questions of ethics were addressed in issues management. The organisations in this study were chosen because of their superlative rankings in measures of ethics and reputation. Research questions explored ethical decision making and the predominant paradigm of ethics in each organisation through six elite interviews and observation. Although both organisations attempted to address ethics, the elite issues managers at one organisation did so more thoroughly and effectively than did the managers at the other organisation. This efficacy was due to the depth of ethical study and training engaged in by the elites, the intense ethical analysis of issues, and the choice of a deontological approach

to ethics. This paper argues that ethics should be concerted, codified, consistent, trained and rigorously analysed. A deontological paradigm of ethical decision making fits all of these criteria, and this research shows that a deontological ethical paradigm can contribute to effective issues management.

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE PRACTICE

There are top executives at many global organisations charged with 'issues management'. The executives in this study are at the top of their profession, making their comments on the ethical paradigms of ethics used at their organisations valuable. These elites are widely respected in the profession and are highly compensated, one making upwards of $1m per year in salary alone. What are the ethical guidelines these elite executives use in issues management at the level of global organisational policy?

Issues management is the executive function that deals with problem solving, organisational policy, long-range planning, and management strategy as well as communication of that strategy both internally and externally. Issues management frequently handles ethical dilemmas through identification of ethical issues, research, analysis, and making decisions of organisation–wide pol–

icy. Issues management is a high-level function within the organisation, which is why this study includes what are termed 'elites'. Frequently, these are the 'right hand' men and women of the CEO who counsel on organisation-wide policy.

There are many definitions of issues management in the literature, each contributing insight into a diverse function. Building on his definition in Heath and Nelson (1986), Heath (1997: 4) defined an issue as a 'contestable question of fact, value, or policy that affects how stakeholders grant or withhold support and seek changes through public policy'. Chase (1984: 38) defined an issue as 'an unsettled matter which is ready for decision'. In a more recent discussion, Chase and Crane (1996) stated, 'an issue exists when there is a gap between corporate action and stakeholder expectation', and they view issues management as the process of bridging that gap (p. 130).

Lauzen and Dozier (1994: 163) stressed the boundary-spanning and environmental-scanning roles of the issues manager in their definition: '[issues management is] the process that allows organizations to know, understand, and interact effectively with their environments'. Clearly, Lauzen and Dozier approached issues management from a systems theory and strategic management perspective. The rhetorical perspective views issues management as the agent of corporate discourse (Cheney and Vibbert 1987). Heath (1997: 3) maintained that issues management 'helps organizations grow and survive: by reconciling their interests with those of the publics in their environments who have the ability to influence public policy'. Heath's definition illustrated the top-level organisational decision making involved in issues management, and the elites studied in this paper are the persons responsible for the decisions that impact millions of lives worldwide and billions of dollars.

In summary, issues management is the function of strategically aligning the cor-poration with the environment, allowing continued survival and development of relationships with members of that environment. Elite issues managers lead their organisations in not only adapting to change, but also in using an ethical paradigm to analyse and implement that adaptation.

THE ROLE OF ELITE ISSUES MANAGERS IN AN ORGANISATION

Elite executives are included in the dominant coalition of the organisation, or report directly to the CEO. Grunig (1992: 5) defined the dominant coalition as 'the group of senior managers who control the organization'. The dominant coalition is a small group and membership in this decision-making cadre is difficult to attain. Spicer (1997: 97) noted that members of the dominant coalition are the 'principal architects of the organizational schemata', meaning that the culture of the organisation is shaped by the elites. Therefore, how the elites viewed ethics indicated how ethics was viewed throughout the organisation.

The dominant coalition's impact on ethics is apparent in organisational culture (Bowen 2000a). The ethical beliefs of top management set the standard of ethics throughout the organisation because it is the standard by which subordinates are judged. The dominant coalition also set an ethical standard for an organisation through the choices that are made because those choices give the resulting ethical framework legitimacy and acceptance within the organisation.

ETHICAL PARADIGMS

There are three basic ethical paradigms to which the elite executives in an organisation could subscribe (Bowen 2000b). Although there are numerous variations, moral philosophy can be summed up in three approaches: materialism, utilitarianism and deontology.

Materialism is often called egoism or brutal selfishness, and is not generally a normative

school of moral philosophy, but an individually employed surrogate. In this approach, whatever is best for the decision maker is the most ethical approach, meaning that the decision making maximises self interest. This approach is generally a practical application that is commonly observed in persons with little regard for matters of ethics beyond the realm of personal utility, often referred to in philosophy as prudence.

Utilitarian theory decides what is ethical based on the number of people benefited by a decision. Therefore, the right thing to do is decided by the yardstick of 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. The utilitarian framework is commonly employed in business by using a cost-benefit approach to decision making. Utilitarian theory is a consequentialist theory in that the morality of a decision is decided by predicting the consequences of that decision.

The deontological approach to ethical decision making is a non-consequentialist theory, in that the consequences are not a deciding factor in whether a decision is ethical. Rather, the moral worth of a decision is judged by its adherence to universal principles of right and wrong, autonomy, duty to uphold moral laws, and respect. These universal principles are determined by the decision maker employing the law of reversibility; that is, asking whether he or she would be comfortable on the receiving side of a decision. The benefit of this perspective is that although other parties to an issue might not agree with a decision, if those publics can understand and appreciate the morality of a decision and why it was made then the decision can be deemed ethical. Deontology asks if all other people in a similar situation would do the same thing. If so, then the issues manager can be reasonably sure that the decision is an ethically defensible one.

Issues managers fall primarily into one school of ethics or another. Although elements of other decision-making paradigms

can be present in a decision, the wording the decision maker uses to describe decision-making factors gives clues as to the relative importance of each factor. The primary decision-making factor is the most important consideration in the range of alternatives available for an issue and in deciding which alternative is the preferential one for the organisation.

Ethics is best viewed as a *process* of decision making. The factors used in this process tell us how an issues manager views the issue as well as what he or she deemed an important consideration in deciding the issue. Therefore, we can discern the primary ethical decision-making model for a manager, based on his or her description of the decision-making process in an ethical issue.

Research questions

The considerations involved in issues management and ethical paradigms that issues managers use in approaching decisions, as well as the rare opportunity to interview and observe elites at the top of their professions, led to the following research questions:

RQ 1 What is your organisation's view of ethics and the importance accorded ethical training and codes of ethics by the CEO and dominant coalition?

RQ 2 When do ethics enter the issues management decision-making process?

RQ 3 Do you think one philosophical approach (materialism, utilitarianism or deontology) is superior to the others for decision making in issues management? Which approach do you primarily use?

METHODOLOGY

Access was granted by two organisations that permitted the researcher to study issues management and ethics in their world headquarters. These two organisations are the pharmaceutical manufacturers Organisation A and Organisation B. Guaranteeing confi-

dentiality was a condition of access to each organisation. Data were collected through in-depth, elite interviews and observation.

Marshall and Rossman (1995) defined elites as individuals within an organisation who hold positions of authority and influence. They usually understand the overall significance of a company's position in the business environment. Moreover, they normally have comprehensive knowledge of the organisational infrastructure (Marshall and Rossman 1995; Thomas 1995). The elites in this study held titles of vice president or higher in public affairs, issues management or corporate communication. These executives had direct access to the CEO and were responsible for organisation-wide issues of global policy.

Elite interviews

Six in-depth interviews with three elites were conducted in a two-phase, semi-structured interview approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with the head of issues management in Organisation A and the top two elite issues managers in Organisation B. Although the number of interviews is small, researchers (Hertz and Imber 1995a; Ragin 1994; Yeager and Kram 1995) believe that small sample size is not a drawback due to the extraordinary level of information supplied by elite executives.

Interviews were based on the techniques suggested by McCracken (1988) and Spradley (1979) and augmented based on recommendations from scholars who specialise in researching elites: Dexter (1970), Hertz and Imber (1995b), Yeager and Kram (1995), Useem (1995), and Thomas (1995). It is notoriously difficult to gain access to corporate elites (Thomas 1995; Hertz and Imber 1995a). Therefore, the time was used in the most efficient manner possible. Telephone conversations, sharing meals, and e-mails augmented interview data

An advantage of interviewing elites was their ability to give expansive information

(Useem 1995). The elite participants were asked macro-level questions about the mission of the organisation regarding ethics, top-down ethical decision making, and the dominant coalition's attitude toward ethics. Yeager and Kram (1995) suggested that when studying corporate ethics among elites, the researcher must be aware of the level of responsibility that each elite must take for decisions and be wary of appearing to judge the issue. They suggested framing the concept of ethics as 'difficult or challenging managerial decisions ... focus[ed] on value conflicts' (1995: 53-54) rather than in terms of right and wrong. The researcher emphasised the difficulty of the dilemmas in an attempt to avoid alienating participants. As Fontana and Frey (1994: 367) argued, 'Gaining trust is essential to an interviewer's success'.

The elites were provided a brief 'agenda' of topics to discuss in the interview, as suggested by Thomas (1995). The elites knew the topic of this research, because gaining access necessitated disclosure, so nothing was lost by providing discussion topics. In fact, scholars (Douglas 1985; Fontana and Frey 1994; Thomas 1995) argued that informing the participant of topics to be covered helps the elite mentally recall more complex material, generating contemplative, rich data.

Observation

Supplementary data came from observing the interaction of the elite issues managers with the staff responsible for issues management in each organisation. The researcher observed the elites conducting general work and holding issues management meetings. In this study, data were gathered through the complete observer role as defined by Atkinson and Hammersley (1994). Lindlof (1995: 148) expounded on the 'complete observer role', in which the members of the organisation were aware of the researcher, but observation took place in the least possible intrusive

manner. This approach generated the most naturalistic data possible (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Adler and Adler (1994: 382) noted that 'observation produces great rigor when combined with other methods'. Observation provided a valuable *emic* perspective that yielded insight into the actual behaviours of the practitioners conducting issues management. The decision-making process in meetings and other discussions regarding issues management provided insight into the ethical frameworks of the elite issues managers, the values of the organisation, and to the importance that the organisational culture affords ethics.

RESULTS
RQ 1: What is your organisation's view of ethics and the importance accorded ethical training and codes of ethics by the CEO and dominant coalition?

The organisation's view of ethics in its overall mission indicated the level of importance given to ethical examination and ethical decision making. Further, the importance accorded to ethics training and holding an organisational mission of ethics or a code of ethics at the top level of the organisation was an indicator of the importance of ethics in the organisation. RQ 1 was designed to elicit the elite issues managers' assessments of the organisational value placed on ethics, as well as data supporting or contradicting that assessment, through exploring the ethical support activities carried out on a recurrent basis.

View of ethics in Organisation A
In Organisation A, the elite issues manager declared, 'I would say that ethical considerations permeate everything we do.' The issues manager spoke of an organisational culture of ethics. The elite could not define the organisation's approach to ethics *per se*, but expressed a desire to do what was morally right. She commented:

'I know you want to talk about what we define as ethics. But it's hard to get to my view or perceptions of whatever we mean by that. There is an inherent culture here to do the right thing. And there is an inherent culture that we abide by the, you know, the principle put forth by [company founder].'

Ethics in Organisation A were not made explicit in a creed or ethics statement. Rather, Organisation A hired experienced individuals and assumed that these people brought ethical rigour along with them to their decision making. The issues manager believed that strong personal ethics was reinforced by an organisational culture of ethical behaviour at Organisation A. The organisation had an unofficial motto of a statement made by the company founder that the business should be 'conducted for the people, not the profits.' The idea was endorsed by the elite issues manager as an informal guide to ethical decision making.

Organisation A did not conduct any training in ethics or ethical decision making for its employees at any level of the company. An inherent culture of ethical decision making was assumed but not trained or planned for in an official way. Organisation A expected ethical behaviour from employees but had not trained issues managers how to go about the analysis required to make ethical decisions. Therefore, ethics was rarely discussed as a consideration in the issues management team meetings in which the organisation's response to an issue was decided. The elite issues manager explained:

'Now, depending on the issue, the ethical consideration may be just assumed and kind of dealt with. Or they may explicitly need to be put on the table. And so I say this is kind of inherent and pervasive 'cause it doesn't come up unless we are faced with an issue or dilemma that we have to think, okay how would [company founder] guide us in this case?'

Although Organisation A did not provide

ethics training for issues managers, there was nevertheless a strong expectation of ethical decision making, as evidenced in this statement:

> Interviewer: Let me ask about the issue managers and the issue management team. How are they trained in ethics or where do they get their ethical knowledge to make these types of decisions?
>
> Elite 1: You know, part of the training is kind of a culture of this, it's just the general underpinnings of ethics, ethics in leadership that is ingrained in [Organisation A]. Um, historically by culture and then more recently on leadership principles that we expect nothing less than employees around the world to abide by the highest levels of ethical conduct. And in business practices, be it research, marketing, sales — the issues management needs to be defined in your particular role of responsibilities. But nonetheless, we expect the highest level of ethical behaviour.

Expecting issues managers to make the right decisions in extremely complex situations without the proper training to analyse the ethics of those decisions is problematic. The informal ethics motto of Organisation A obligates employees to do the right thing for the users of its products, but the organisation gives little formal guidance in determining what that right decision should be. The motto has elements of both deontology and utilitarian ethical theory.

By not providing ethics training for issues managers, Organisation A leaves open the possibility for ethical problems resulting from poorly considered issues management decisions. According to the elite issues manager, team members make ethical decisions based on their own personal belief systems in conjunction with the organisation's expectation of ethical behaviour. However, the failure to provide ethics training means that the actual belief system used to make decisions could be

any number of things, and could lead to inconsistent and problematic decisions.

Views of ethics in Organisation B

Organisation B held an organisational culture in which ethics played a paramount role. Further, the organisation has an official ethics statement that sets out the specific responsibilities that should be considered in an ethical dilemma. The ethics statement is highly deontological and provides a hierarchy of publics to consider in an ethical dilemma. Because two elite issues managers in Organisation B were interviewed, they will be referred to as elite 2 and elite 3, with the previously introduced executive in Organisation A being elite 1. The two elites interviewed in Organisation B both reported directly to the CEO, although elite 3 also reported indirectly to and worked alongside elite 2.

Elite 2 declared, 'We hold dear our core values and our ethical value system and believe that will carry us into the next century. I think we have an overarching ethical base.' In explaining the organisation's view of ethics, ethics training, and code of ethics, elite 3 explained:

> 'Ethics is a very important part of the organisational culture here at [Organisation B]. It is very much something that we do on purpose with the intent to instil ethics in the subsidiary companies, with the view in mind from corporate headquarters that ethical decisions should be made on a daily basis down the line at every level of the organisation. Everybody is the ethics officer.'

Elite 3 stated that ethics training for all executive-level employees takes place over a five-day training period. She explained that the training period is 'kicked off by the CEO to convey the level of importance' of the training. The training includes learning the organisational approach to ethical dilemmas, in-depth study of the ethics statement, learning a flow-chart-type deontological model of

Figure 1: Ethical training by role of ethics in decision making
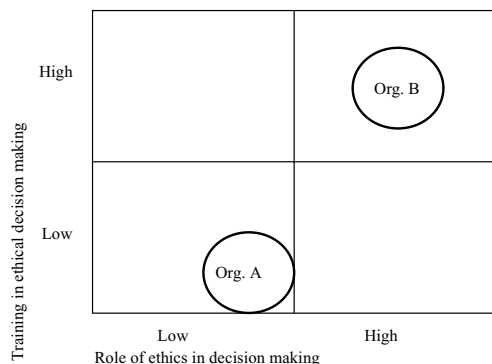
ethical decision making, and working through ethics cases. Elite 3 also noted that ethics training is given to all employees of Organisation B: Managers are trained by an ethicist and line employees are provided ethics training materials from headquarters administered by each subsidiary.

Organisation B provides a deontological ethics statement to guide its decision making. Elite 2 indicated that in her job, managing issues is really a question of doing the right thing. This elite emphasised the difficulty of the decisions, noting that sometimes the situations are so complex that grey areas present a range of several options, but in those cases the issues managers try to determine what is 'the best right thing'. Elite 2 concurred with the difficulty of making ethical decisions when he stated, 'Trying to do the right thing is an easy thing to say but it's absolutely the most difficult principle to carry forward in anything that you do.' Both elites argued that the ethics training and analysis expected and encouraged by the organisation helps the issues management team in decision making, and provides a competitive advantage to the company through its consistent ranking as one of the most trusted companies in the world. Clearly, the consistent and thorough ap-

proach to ethics of Organisation B helps to make its issues management effective.

RQ 2: When do ethics enter the issues management decision-making process?
Ethics in issues management at Organisation A

The issues management process at Organisation A centres around the gathering of information on the issue, according to the elite issues manager. Ethics might enter the discussion and it might not — she maintained that certain types of issues required ethical analysis and others did not, depending on the importance of the issue, its visibility, whether it directly involved patients, and other factors. She reasoned:

'I would say that the ethical considerations permeate everything we do. But, for instance, when an issue comes up, we basically will put together a team ... we need to put our best team together and strategise. Overall, what might be a proposed strategy for [Organisation A]? And, therefore you go to: how do we go about implementing? As usual in that process, there is a lot of analysis to be done. A lot of facts and figures, talking to people internal at the company, talking to people external from the company, so there could be a lot of fact-finding.'

As this example illustrated, issues were not usually discussed in relation to their ethical implications. When a team met to review an issue and decided a course of action, there was no or little discussion of the ethics of the situation. In fact, the elite believed that there was infrequent disagreement among issues managers about what was the right thing to do in many situations, so that arguing the ethics of the decision was unnecessary.

Again Organisation A relied on a culture that values ethics, but provides little guidance on those ethics. Issues managers were not encouraged to discuss the ethics of issues as a matter of routine decision-making. However, Organisation A considered and dis-

cussed ethics in certain high-visibility situations. Those situations warranting a high level of ethical analysis were normally only those perceived by the issues managers to be matters that would be put on the public agenda, such as the pricing of an AIDS drug the elite used as an example of an issue warranting ethical analysis. Pricing the new AIDS drug was a contestable issue because of its expense to manufacture, the activism of the AIDS community, and the concern for the public interest Organisation A exhibited by ultimately pricing the drug below cost. Even on issues of such magnitude, the organisation did not provide the training or guidance necessary for a comprehensive ethical analysis. An individual approach to ethics was employed, leaving the analysis to happenstance.

Ethics in issues management at Organisation B

Deliberations on the ethics of issues were prominent in Organisation B. In the issues-management process of Organisation B, ethics played a primary role in the decisions of both individual issues managers and group decision making. A typical issues-management scenario involving a group decision-making process would include ethical analysis as a part of the initial discussion of the issue, the analysis and planning around the issue, and the implementation of the action. Ethics was consciously included in every issue decision in which there was even a remote ethical implication. Such consideration of ethics was analysed around the organisation's ethics statement. Strategic publics and stakeholders were represented in the ethics statement, and its four paragraphs were each discussed in relevance to the issue under analysis. A common utterance in the meetings observed for this research followed the explanation elite 2 provided: 'The decision is discussed in light of the question, "What would the ethics statement have us do in this situation?"'

Elite 3 argued that ethical considerations

were the first part of issues management at Organisation B. She contended:

> 'The first step is very important to drive home the notion that you've got to first recognise that there's an ethical issue. Once you tell people "this is an ethics issue" a lot of people can figure out what they're going to do. But until they see that, it's not so easy. So that's the first thing — stop and think: Is there a challenge here, a moral challenge? People didn't always understand that they had a moral challenge. They didn't see that they had an ethical issue. If they saw that, then they would stop and think. These are things that people don't do naturally. So, you have to force them to think about it.'

In considering the ethics of an issue, Organisation B encouraged issues managers to refer frequently to the ethics statement, the ethics manual, and the ethical decision-making model. The elites also encouraged the use of more informal deontological 'decision tests' such as the one described by elite 3:

> 'We ask, can you explain your decision to your family, can you explain your decision to the people affected? Not just your family but to the individuals who are impacted? If you can't do that then it's not a good decision. So that's one test.'

Elite 2 added to this the understanding of why ethics played such a crucial role in Organisation B's issues management:

> 'It's all about trust. I think there's a bank of public trust and confidence, and we need to keep investing in that bank. We try to promote a culture that has everybody focused on enhancing this reputation. It raises the bar on how people expect us to act and react as a company.'

Elite issues managers considered ethics prominently and consistently in the issue decisions faced at Organisation B. Both organisations in this study operated under the deontological intention of a morally good

will, or 'doing the right thing'. For Organisation B, ethics was the most prominent decision-making factor on an issue in many situations. Organisation B had produced and implemented a consistent and methodical way of analysing ethical issues, whereas Organisation A had not yet embraced the importance of ethical analysis — in all but issues of highest magnitude.

RQ 3: Do you think one philosophical approach (materialism, utilitarianism or deontology) is superior to the others for decision making in issues management? Which approach do you primarily use?

The researcher briefly reviewed each of the three main approaches to ethics with the elites, and provided written definitions a week in advance of the interview. The goal was to discern which ethical paradigms the elites used in their issues management, which paradigm was preferred in the organisation, and to verify their stated preference by asking for examples, decision-making factors, and questions used in the analysis of dilemmas.

Materialism is an egoistic approach to ethics based on the idea of maximising the benefit of a decision for the decision maker. Utilitarianism is the paradigm that weighs the worth of a decision by its consequences, seeking to create the greatest good for the greatest number, similar to a cost-benefit analysis. Deontology judges the moral worth of a decision not by its consequences but by its concordance with universal moral principles of right and wrong, in which agents seek to 'do the right thing' regardless of consequences. Both of the organisations in this study held to moral principles other than materialism, so the researcher focused on distinguishing between the paradigms of utilitarianism and deontology in use at the organisations.

Predominant ethical paradigm in Organisation A

Because Organisation A had no codified ethics statement or formal approach to ethics,

discerning the organisation's primary ethical paradigm was difficult. The organisation used mixed paradigms of ethics according to the situation under consideration and depending on who was making the decision. This exchange with elite 1 illustrated the complexity of Organisation A's approach to ethics:

> Interviewer: When you are making those types of ethical [issue] decisions, do you normally think about what's the right or wrong thing to do? Or do you think about the consequences of the decision and who's going to be impacted by the decision?

> Elite 1: You know, I think it's kind of both. We certainly make decisions based upon who would be impacted. We try to understand how will people be impacted by our decision and then decide based upon what we think that impact would be. Then we have to come back and say okay, based on that impact, knowing that we have our high ethical standards, our high scientific standards, our obligation to do no harm . . . but probably the more appropriate statement is that we analyze the risks and benefits.

An analysis of risks and benefits was an indicator of a utilitarian approach because it attempted to quantify the greater good in a decision-making scenario. The elite issues manager in Organisation A acknowledged that both paradigms of ethics were used, although her personal preference was a utilitarian form of decision making, and the preference of the issues managers on her teams observed in this study was deontology. This disconcerted approach to ethical decision making was problematic because the decision-making paradigms of deontology and utilitarianism were in direct opposition; each valued different decision-making factors, placed different emphases on consequences, and each held contradicting moral principles for guiding decision making. Further, using the two in combination could

lead to inconsistent decision making, thereby damaging relationships with stakeholders and publics.

The elite issues manager in Organisation A gave an example of her decision-making process on the issue of setting the price for a rare and expensive AIDS drug. She observed:

'I think that it's that we try, we are going to always try to do the right thing, put the patients first. You know, at that point profits weren't an issue. Because we struggled at even marketing things and how they were being sold. But I think our ethical model, in this case, was "whom did our decision impact?" Who depended most on us in making the right decision? In this case it was the patients that were really depending on us for their last hope for receiving a life saving medicine.'

In this example, the elite used the deontological standard of 'doing the right thing' by putting the patients first, regardless of profit, then extended a utilitarian framework to considerations of the number of patients affected by the decision. Therefore, the method of ethical analysis was inconsistent with the goal of 'doing the right thing' because it was based on consequences rather than principles of right. She further expanded by stating that the company was concerned about the development of drug-resistant strains of the AIDS virus. Through carefully controlled distribution of the drugs, the elite explained that Organisation A sought to 'do the greater good for the greatest number of people, so that some day greater numbers of people can potentially benefit from AIDS drugs', a clearly utilitarian ideal.

The elite issues manager believed that a high level of moral accountability in Organisation A would lead to better, symmetrical relationships with publics by emphasising understanding. She argued that a utilitarian paradigm of examining the consequences of ethical decisions on publics and talking with publics about the organisation's understanding of consequences would lead to a competitive advantage for the company. She used both deontology and utilitarianism as she reasoned:

'What are the consequences? You know, at the end of the day we want [Organisation A] to be perceived that we did put patients first, that we did the right thing even under the most extraordinary circumstances. That people still say [Organisation A] really displayed a high level of leadership, kind of a moral compass, and did it in a way that really inspired trust and confidence of those who are impacted by the decisions we make. Because I think people have a better means of accepting the decision if they knew that your process of getting there was well thought out, took into considerations the perspectives of as many as possible, understood the consequences, and then in all of that made the decision as to which way to go.'

There was no predominating paradigm of ethics at Organisation A because there was no organisational guidance, training, or codified values statement regarding ethics. There, each person was expected to use personal values to decide organisational policy issues. Although the participant's statements reflected a deontological moral intention of doing the right thing, they showed that elite 1 was unaware of the extent to which moral philosophy and ethical analysis could have contributed to effective decision making. The elite issues manager's ethical paradigm differed from that of both the team members and the organisation's unofficial ethics motto. This disparity poses a problem that needs to be resolved in order to avoid the ideological confusion that impacts Organisation A's issue decision-making.

Predominant ethical paradigm in Organisation B

Organisation B had a highly-codified organisational approach to ethics, and it was of a deontological nature. The officially adopted ethics statement, ethics training, and the issue decision-making model all reflected the

deontological paradigms of both elite 2 and elite 3. These issues managers did not write these ethics tools but expressed understanding of and support for the deontological principles that guided the analyses.

The elite issues managers in Organisation B contended that doing the right thing was the most important outcome of a decision to them, regardless of consequences. They realised that financial loss would often ensue, that relationships with certain publics or stakeholders might be strained, that the decision could have negative consequences, or that others might not understand or agree with the decision. True to their deontological view, the elite issues managers argued for doing the right thing above all else. Elite 2 explained his deontological view:

'The truth is that it was very much a part of my family and my upbringing. I remember very specific interventions by my father that ah, you know, rooted this notion of right and wrong. And I'm a very practical person — that for me is where it's rooted. I don't believe that view of doing what is right for the most people, I think that is a dangerous road to travel. I think that you really have to decide on the basis of what you believe is the right thing to do and don't let the consequences decide for you.'

Evidencing a deontological paradigm, elite 2 explained that, although Organisation B tried to understand its issues 'within the context' of the situation, consequences were not the driving factor in decision making. He confirmed a clear preference for deontology over utilitarianism:

'The first thing we consider in issues management is doing the right thing, that is an absolute. Every individual is important and judging by the greatest number suggests that more is better. When you put numbers around the decision, that is not ethics, it becomes politics. Consequences are always there, but we do the right thing and deal with consequences later.'

Elite 2 relayed many instances of counselling the CEO on ethical dilemmas that had faced the organisation and emphasised the executive's role as a decision maker in a collaborative process. He relayed instances of counsel to the dominant coalition on labour disputes, product tampering or failure, activist pressure, latex allergy litigation, Internet terrorism, child labour, and fatal misuse of various products. The participant emphasised, 'We try to promote a culture that has everybody focused on enhancing our total reputation as an ethical company.'

Elite 3 also held a deontological paradigm that was consistent with the organisational culture of the Organisation B. She argued:

'I believe it's a matter of moral right and wrong and that doing the right thing is always ethical. And I would say that's the basic approach that we strive for. The first thing we look at is, "is this right or wrong?" And against those criteria, is it honest, is it fair, is it just, you know . . . all those kinds of things.'

The examples of issue decision-making that elite 3 provided confirmed that a deontological ethics paradigm was used exclusively. The elite gave this example the deontological reasoning that was used to decide an issue of worldwide worker safety:

'We put in much, much more rigid environment protection in all of our facilities than existed anywhere else. And the reason for that, it was the right thing to do. We had every facility around the world sprinklered. That does not exist in most places. If you go into factories in many parts of the world, they don't require hardly anything. But we maintain every facility of ours to the level of our US facilities and that is, by no means, required. We did it because it was the right thing to do.'

When explaining the process of issues management at Organisation B, the elite expressed the deontological commitment to looking at ethics from the vantage of the publics affected by a decision, in order to

ensure it was universalisable. She said 'then you look at the other side, the ethics from the other point of view'. Deontology also requires the decision maker to make an objective analysis of the decision alternatives using the basis of reason alone. The elite issues manager demonstrated the rigorous ethical discussion and analysis that went into issues management at Organisation B:

> 'There is a right way and there is a wrong way. These really are ethical issues. Knee-jerk reactions are just that. These issues are tough for people. If they are not tough then they are probably not ethical issues. So, you talk and you deliberate, and you end up in a place where you feel you are very and truly sound in this most honest and ethical solution. I don't think you can do that by knee-jerk.'

Elite 3 believed that ethics training was crucial because, 'If you don't teach them what you expect, you are relying on what they walked in the door with. And I don't think in this day and age that we can do that.' She elucidated that the training was designed to familiarise managers with deontological concepts because they tended to weigh costs and benefits or reverted to other value systems without that training. She maintained:

> 'We simply can't leave it up to society to train people. We try to keep them thinking about that as the way they ought to assess what they are doing. Because most people naturally are going to do some kind of situational ethics thing on their own.'

Referring to the ranking of Organisation B in a popular press outlet as one of the most respected companies in the world, elite 3 explained the motivation behind the dedication to ethics at Organisation B:

> 'When we look at it, we believe that a corporation cannot survive in this society except by acceptance of the public. If your company is not making ethical decisions, sooner or later the public is going to know that and they aren't going to accept it. If you're not ethical it catches up with you.'

CONCLUSIONS

According to the data gathered here from three elite issues managers at two top-ranked, global organisations, maintaining a consistent and well-planned approach to ethics contributes to effective issues management. We can see that the organisational approach to ethics should be official, codified in a mission statement or ethics statement, and issues managers should be trained in ethical decision making for maximum ability to act as ethics counsel to the dominant coalition and CEO. In essence, ethics must be strategically managed as a vital portion of issues management.

Although Organisation A intends to be an ethical organisation, it allows ethical frameworks to emerge randomly rather than by managing its approach. The elite issues manager uses multiple approaches to ethics without remaining resolute on one, rendering whatever analysis took place incomplete and inconsistent. Organisation B, in contrast, uses a carefully planned, rational, and deontological approach to ethics that involves in-depth discussion and analysis of the ethical implications of issues.

Although both organisations are highly ranked in polls of corporate ethics, such as *Fortune* magazine, Organisation B consistently outranks Organisation A, and the results of this research shed some light on the reason for the discrepancy. Organisation A's ethical framework needs to be simplified to one predominant paradigm of ethics to contribute to organisational effectiveness. Using an approach to ethics combining deontological and utilitarian frameworks is problematic because it does not heed the objective rationality called for in moral philosophy. Furthermore, issues managers might not accurately predict which issues will become public problems. If all issues are not analysed with the same ethical scrutiny, problems revealing

less-than-desirable decisions might become public. If the organisation analyses the ethics of only major issues, the ethics of normal issues are subjected to haphazard ethical decision making that can leave an impression of erratic behaviour with publics. The elite issues manager should set the standard for a consistently rigorous ethical analysis. Training could provide a basis for analysis of complex ethical situations for managers, rather than expecting them to arrive at the correct decision for the organisation based on individual beliefs.

Organisation B's deontological ethical framework can and does contribute to excellent issues management. Ethics plays a prominent role in issues management in the organisation, oftentimes the tantamount role according to the elites interviewed. These two elites, both charged with worldwide issues management, realised the importance of a concerted and consistent organisational approach to ethical decision making. In many decisions observed for this study, ethics was the primary decision-making factor.

The issues managers at Organisation B are conversant with ethics and are accustomed to considering and discussing ethics in their decisions, and the ethics training the organisation provides has given them acute analytical capacity in ethical dilemmas. Organisation B invests time and money in training its issues managers on ethics, and it is likely that the investment has been worthwhile due to the potential problems avoided through careful ethical analysis. A deontological paradigm of ethics is the most difficult approach to learn and apply, but as this study illustrates, it provides superior ethical analysis and decision making. Consistently using a deontological paradigm of ethics allows publics to view the organisation as reliably ethical, enhancing the credibility and reputation of the company, as well as enhancing its ability to withstand crises.

Ethics should be concerted, codified, consistent, trained, and rigorously analysed. A deontological paradigm of ethical decision making fits all of these criteria, and has proven highly successful where employed. Organisations can learn from these elites that ethics should be incorporated into the strategic mission of the company. Ethical analysis should be a primary component of issues management — ethical analysis will prove to be its own reward through its ability to solve and avert problems.

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