



Kindness as Ethics-in-Practice in the business curriculum

Rita Day^A

A

Academic Director, Business, Law, and Marketing, Dublin Business School, Ireland

Susan R. Robinson^B

B

Senior Lecturer, Management, Human Resources and Law, Adelaide at Kaplan Business School

Keywords

Business;
ethics;
intervention;
kindness;
philanthropy;
virtue.

Abstract

This research explores the pedagogic potential of kindness as a taught construct within a business ethics programme. Kindness in the curriculum is a topic often taught in early years' education (Kindness Curriculum, 2020) but seldom at tertiary level and this research will investigate the intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for this context (Caldwell & Bird, 2015). Business studies can provide students with the knowledge and skills essential to leading and managing people and resources. *Inter alia*, business ethics teaches the fundamentals of refraining from corruption and unfair competition. Furthermore, business ethics programmes might eschew traditional ethical theory, promoting instead such constructs as Triple Bottom Line (TBL) thinking (Giddings, 2002), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Corporate Citizenship. This research considers the taught benefits of modelling philanthropy (kindness delivered at the corporate level) as one positive aspect of business ethicality.

Correspondence

rita.day@dbs.ie^A

Article Info

Received 26 April 2022

Received in revised form 14 June 2022

Accepted 20 July 2022

Available online 22 August 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2022.5.2.ss2>

Instilling dispositions towards ethical behaviour ('virtues') at both the individual and company level remains a key goal of business ethics education. The 'humane' virtues as conceptualised within the modern Positive Psychology movement (Banicki, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) provide a theoretical underpinning for understanding kindness as a behavioural disposition, a tendency to 'tend and befriend' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) that reliably generates ethical businesses grounded in ethical employees (Sternberg, 2001). This research argues that, for a business ethics course, business viewed through the lens of kindness should not be seen through the eyes of the student or the practitioner as an extracurricular activity but deconstructed as ethics-in-practice. The practice-based research intervention is in the form of a one-day student enrichment activity. The enrichment activity takes the form of a case study which looks at kindness through the lens of philanthropy. Students analyse a new case study exploring business philanthropy intervention, then complete a survey to review their opinion on key aspects of ethicality in business. Students evaluated the interconnectedness between ethics and how positive psychology is embedded in business. Thematic analysis was used to determine (a) ways of measuring values in action by doing good, and (b) changes in students' understanding of the role of ethics in business upon completion of the intervention. However, in summary our research suggests that kindness embedded in the business curriculum and academics have a key role in facilitating this improvement.

Introduction

As educators, our purpose is to lead students and manage the curriculum to create collective ethical value. Our academically oriented programme planning shapes the ethical understanding of undergraduate and post graduate students today and post-graduation. As academics and business leaders, we recognise the importance of kindness in the business curriculum and distil it as a value in future business employees, business leaders, and enterprises. Kindness in the curriculum is a topic often taught in early years' education (Kindness Curriculum, 2020) but seldom at tertiary level. This research explores the pedagogic potential of kindness as a taught construct within a business programme. How might a business ethics programme built upon kindness deliver sound ethical outcomes? Business-minded people need more than just being of a good character; education can help prepare students and business owners of tomorrow about making ethical decisions; follow good governance; how values conflicts might impact on life and career; protect human rights and the dignity of all people involved in business, oppose discrimination and exploitation; protect the right of future generations and the planet (Ferrell, 2019). This research considers the taught benefits of modelling philanthropy (kindness delivered at the corporate level) as one positive aspect of business ethicality. We consider (and reject) some sceptical arguments querying the soundness of founding (business) ethics upon Kindness and Philanthropy using an intervention with tertiary-level students to educate the benefits of philanthropic business.

Literature

Philanthropy relies upon personal identification of donors with the causes they support (Harvey, 2021). Recent research into corporate philanthropy suggests a serendipitous connection between philanthropic investment and emotionality finding that positive affect amongst employees at a firm's headquarters encourages higher executive expenditure on corporate giving. (Dang & Nguyen, 2021) discovered that, where a company's management communicates emotional commitment to a social cause, both investors and markets may respond favourably to philanthropic spending.

For Kant, the benevolent emotions provided a weak basis for ethicality. According to Kant, if morality is grounded in humane feelings, then our capacity for ethical behaviour reflects the extent to which individuals inherit naturally benevolent impulses (Schneewind, 1992). Applying similar thinking to business philanthropy, ethically approved firms would become those enjoying the lucky accident, of possessing a CEO or other champion(s) interested in realising public good. This suggests that ethics should be by design and not by good fortune. Likewise, learning by design is a similar movement to ensure diversity, equity and inclusion is designed for in the classroom through innovative assessment in the building of transversal skills.

Sceptical argument 1

Is Kindness a genuine 'virtue' (character strength)? 'Kindness' is a late-starter among the character strengths. As a 'humane' character trait, kindness does not appear among the Ancient Greek virtues.

Sceptical argument 2

The benevolent emotions provide a weak basis for ethicality and if morality is grounded in benevolent (humane) feelings then our capacity for ethical behaviour reflects the extent to which individuals inherit naturally benevolent impulses (Schneewind, 1992). Individuals lacking such impulses might lack a capacity to be ethical/good. This prospect offended Kant's sense of justice. Kant believed that the capacity for ethical behaviour should be equally open to all persons. Does this quote simply mean that everyone can learn to be ethical, from which we can extrapolate that organisation need to embed practices that promote ethical behaviours?

Benevolent emotions as philanthropic supererogatory

The benevolent emotions (e.g., philanthropy) provide a weak basis for business' ethicality. Ethically approved firms would become those enjoying the lucky accident, of possessing a CEO or other champion(s) interested in realising public good. Philanthropy is supererogatory (good to have, but activity over and beyond duty). The argument here is a close parallel of the argument just provided, for treating kindness or benevolence as the human instinct that grounds ethical behaviour. The Strengths of Humanity table suggests that Social Intelligence is less important within institutions and rituals.

Table 1: Criteria for Strengths of Humanity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 292).

	Criteria for Strengths of Humanity										TALLY
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Love	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10/10
Kindness	X	X	X	X	X	~X	X	X	X	X	10/10
Social intelligence	X	X	X	X	X	~X	X	X	X		9/10

~ Somewhat satisfies criterion.

The 'humane' virtues as conceptualised within the modern positive psychology movement (Banicki, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and provide a theoretical underpinning for understanding kindness as a behavioural disposition, a tendency to 'tend and befriend' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) that reliably generates ethical businesses grounded in ethical employees. Philanthropy relies upon donors personally identifying with the causes they support (Harvey, 2021). Recent research into corporate philanthropy suggests a serendipitous connection between philanthropic investment and emotionality. The positive affect amongst employees at a firm's headquarters encourages higher

executive expenditure on corporate giving. (Dang & Nguyen, 2021) where a company's management communicates emotional commitment to a social cause, both investors and markets may respond favourably to philanthropic spending. This serendipitous connection lends support to the Kantian argument of the previous slide.

At the very least, we might assume that, where philanthropy is required to make good shortcomings in public funding, many good causes and desirable public goods will be neglected because these are not emotionally engaging. The notion that philanthropy is supererogatory, something way beyond duty, does not seem to figure into the thinking of Carroll's conceptualisation of the pyramid. Carroll sees philanthropy as one of four business responsibilities that should be embraced in any strong conceptualisation of CSR: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. It links philanthropic responsibilities with the good corporate citizenship of a company. As a concept, corporate citizenship seems to have lost out over CSR, as the term of art for a company's social responsibilities.

The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility

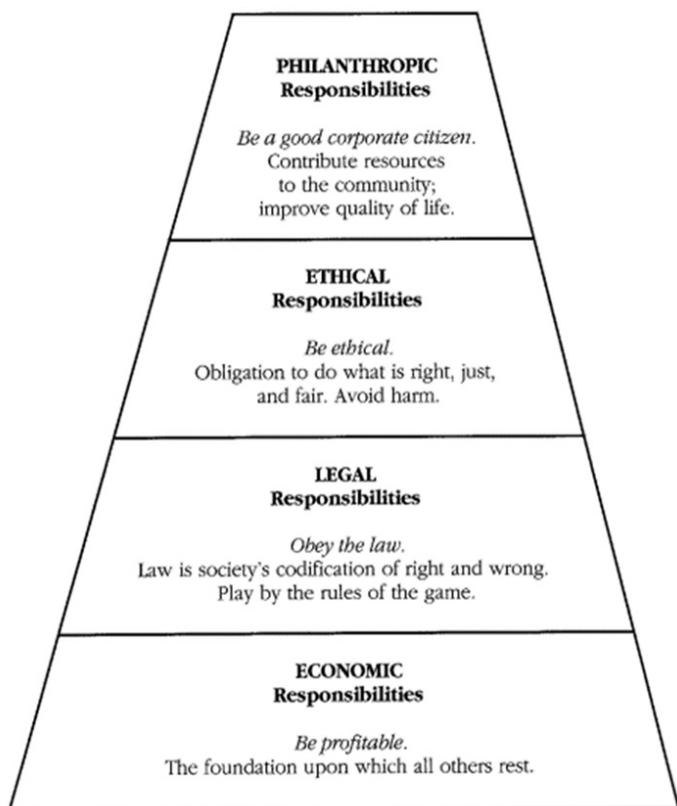


Figure 1: The pyramid of corporate social responsibility (Carroll, 1991, p. 42).

To some extent, students come to business programs already formed, ethically speaking, as people do have predispositions to behave ethically or unethically. Business ethics education aims to reinforce existing good dispositions (Trevino, 2017). Business ethics education reminds students that their character strengths (virtues) should not be left at the company door. Modelling good ethical business behaviours, and ethically sound companies is key to this education. Business Ethics does not teach ethical behaviour from scratch. Students arrive at Business Ethics programs

with their ethical instincts already developed.

Evaluative method

The research proposed a practice-based research intervention (Creswell, 2014), in the form of a one-day ethics enrichment activity in which students analyse a relevant report exploring kindness in the curriculum. An article was disseminated to the students to read the day before the intervention and to reflect and take some notes. Respondents were asked to consider statements pertaining to a journal article on understanding university students' conceptualisations and perceptions of kindness: a mixed methods study (Binfet et al., 2021). This article was chosen because the subjects were relatable both being at university level and the topic was the same as the intervention. Students then evaluated the interconnectedness between ethics and how positive psychology can be embedded in business. Thematic analysis was used to determine ways of measuring values in action by doing good.

The authors (Day and Robinson) delivered a short presentation on Day 2 on ethicality in business to the students and asked the students to complete a short survey at the end of the presentation. The focus was on how a leader or manager raises values-based issues in an effective manner through a carefully considered approach and used the report to base a robust discussion on to identify positive examples of times when people have found ways to voice and thereby implement their values in the workplace. Through the lens of positive psychology with a strategic purpose and using self-assessment tools and reflective practice to see how an individual's decisions align with ethics in an organisation and expectations of how people will behave in various situations.

Subjects

The subjects were a group of Master of Business Administration full-time students studying the research methods module. The class composition was mostly male, and culturally diverse (around 60% international and 40% domestic students from Ireland). The survey was conducted using Survey Monkey from fifteen participants and asked six questions. Sixty-one percent completion rate with the estimated time to complete was three minutes.



Figure 2: MBA students in a classroom.

Data collection procedures

A discussion followed the PowerPoint presentation on ethics and the subjects were asked to complete a short online survey of six questions openly and honestly. The discussion was completed in Zoom within a hybrid environment as some students were online and some were in the classroom. Students were asked to complete the survey in class or if they wished to consider the questions for longer, to submit by the end of the day. The questions were chosen based on no prior knowledge of the subject and could be completed using experiential learning, opinion and drawn from one's own personality characteristics. Within the room, 15 students (n=15) submitted their responses. Some of the responses have been listed below.

Results

RQ1. Do you feel that your attitude to a business would change, upon hearing of their acts of philanthropy or kindness?

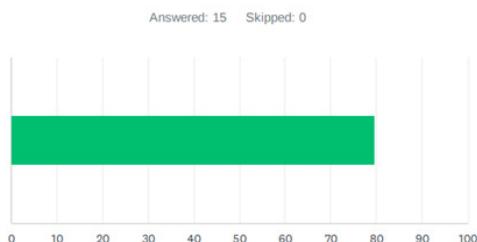


Figure 3: Responses to RQ 1.

The scale of 0-100 was used to ask this question and the results were 80% of the fifteen students who submitted the survey. The question was designed to probe further into why the students scored 80% by asking a similar question for RQ2.

RQ2. Why do you feel that your attitude to a business would change, upon hearing of their acts of philanthropy or kindness?

The response to the question on whether attitudes would change upon hearing of acts of philanthropy or kindness was centred on the intrinsic nature of doing good and how it would instil the students with encouragement, enthusiasm, motivation, and ideas. One student described how business with a philanthropic disposition felt very inclusive and less profit-orientated. Students felt that it depends on the companies' attitudes to the employees as well and there should not be a disconnect between the outward projection of generosity and a disparity with the workforce. This comment was very insightful because it recognised some altruistic attitudes of some companies and how they differed from their treatment of employees. Some of the comments were around morale traits and how they impact the whole of humanity, even expressing the inclination that philanthropy was part of their goals. Students felt that this attitude about kindness was a necessity in today's business development and environment. At the end of the question, students felt that volunteering in an organisation should be invested in and is a core part of the business structure, which

did not suggest that it was top-down leadership, but part of a person's personality and life choices.

RQ3. What things might prevent persons from displaying kindness to one another?

This question really delved into what sort of things would prevent a person from displaying kindness, some of the responses were around time, patience, pride, and interest. One student suggested that it may be related to a negative past experience of being kind and how this may make him/her reluctant to help in the future. Interestingly, students spoke about the fear of judgment in this answer and about their own insecurities about being kind, based on personality but also based on societies standards, suggesting that this may be a cultural attitude or related to ego. The point on ego was expanded to review other people's opinion of kindness through the lens of unintentionally hurting someone through trying to help, this speaks to individual insecurities and concern about the environment rather than the person he/she is trying to help.

RQ4. Can you identify factors that would stand in the way of a business engaging in acts of kindness?

This question looked at preventative attitudes to acts of kindness and the considerations were cost, time, the lack of conviction or purpose alignment, pride, lack of resources, legal and economic factors. The students also considered the reasons which were boosting confidence, control, influence, and an interesting point was the fact that it would be completed if it were part of the process-centred approach by management. The social cohesion aspect of kindness was brought into this answer through "understanding the community" which again speaks to the cultural aspect of the question and answer. Students addressed this question as employees and citizens which speaks to the global citizenship nature of this research.

RQ5. Is it easier for individual persons to display kindness, than it is for a business enterprise to display kindness?

This question looked at individual displays of kindness and whether this could be better achieved than by an organisation. The students were able to express the connectedness of employees as stakeholders, but interestingly looked at as part of the onboarding process in an organisation and how the training was aligned to the company goals, vision, and mission. Students felt that any acts of kindness should be at an individual level for dissemination, both inside and outside of the organisation and strongly felt that it should be on a "daily basis" rather than a one-off corporate charity event. Students felt that the gratifying aspect comes from private acts rather than corporate acts on a much bigger scale.

RQ6. What is your understanding of modern business ethics education as a form of virtue ethics?

This question was complex to understand the interconnectedness between business ethics education and how it forms part of virtue ethics. The students felt that this was a two-way process and was very much about respect for individuals; "happiness, humility, cooperation, honesty, simplicity, love, unity, and peace" were all words expressed about bringing change to society through virtue ethics being taught in business. These comments align with Peterson and Seligman (2004). Students felt that if they were "both correlated and included in curriculum, it could bring change in society." There was a strong sense of benefit to others and self and that these could be mutually result-orientated. The final comments were around face-to-face interactions and interventions as being highly beneficial and a key part of this process.



Figure 4: An Nvivo word cloud showing the key terms from the survey.

NVivo emerging themes were based on the frequency of the responses and based on a qualitative approach.

Morality – “It’s basically a moral trait”.

Motivational - "Because its gives motivation to the team and more enthusiasm to work, devote their time with business development".

Ego – “Factors i think which may prevent somebody from being kind to someone is their Ego and their behavior of not being friendly to somebody”.

Individual versus Collective – “Yes, it is easier as the individual can act independently”, though monetary donations can be given privately and not collectively if one feels so.

Resources – “Less resources, resources who aren't willing to participate”.

Trait – “It’s basically a different trait to understand business ethics and to indulge in a different perspective”.

Limitations

This was only a small-scale intervention based on a two-plan approach to allow reading time and to capture student views on ethics as a concept and as a practice in business. The research had a limited number of students n=15 who were involved in the research activity and who actually submitted their responses to the online survey. Question 5 generated mostly yes answers and could have been an open question. A broader question or reworded question would have allowed for more qualitative feedback. Additionally, the opportunity for any other comments would also have allowed scope for a further interrogation of the topic. The students were all postgraduate students studying for a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and the answers may have been different from a mixed cohort of undergraduate and postgraduate students or using an alternative programme of study. It would also have been advantageous to gain an insight into the student opinion on this topic was before reading the report. As an intervention, the researchers felt that it was too short to conclusively determine the opinions and views of students and a longer study with more participants may have helped. The authors would also have liked to see where in the results it showed that the students saw 'ego as...' and why should it be a corrective action? This would have helped building the scaffolding for the participants and for the research study.

Discussion

A longer intervention with face-to-face discussion rather than online using Zoom would have enabled a more collegiate and discursive environment. These links to the inclusive environment align with Giddings (2003). That said, the research study did provide an interesting insight into how students see an interconnectedness between kindness and morality. The other interesting, noteworthy point is that students are also seeing leadership ego as a preventative rather than specifically resource driven. As educators, we can view this as a potentially corrective action which can be taught. A convergent parallel mixed method could be used to explore the topic and the future intent of ethics through workshop scenarios and with role-models in this field. Kindness as ethics-in-practice is an interdisciplinary understanding of a complex topic or concept. The question which looked at preventative measures stemmed from individual rather than resources, social media, or corporate drive (Zolotoy, 2021). Thus, suggesting that ethics in business should be explored as a co-creative process with students rather than from an academic viewpoint and that student voice can be the driver in an otherwise myriad of ethical possibilities.

Conclusion

This research argues that, for a business ethics course, business viewed through the lens of kindness should not be seen as an extracurricular activity but deconstructed as ethics-in-practice. It outlined a practice-based research intervention, in the form of a one-day student enrichment activity. Instilling dispositions towards ethical behaviour

('virtues') at both the individual and company level remains a key goal of business ethics education and the MBA intervention described here forms an intervention in this direction. Students analysed a new case study exploring a business philanthropy intervention, then delivered their reflections through a survey. Students then evaluated the interconnectedness between ethics and how positive psychology can be embedded in business. Thematic analysis was used to determine (a) ways of measuring values in action by doing good, and (b) changes in students' understanding of the role of ethics in business upon completion of the case study. This activity did prove that students thought something was incorrect and therefore proving the authors' claim that Kindness should be taught in a business class.

References

Banicki, K. (2014). Positive psychology on character strengths and virtues. A disquieting suggestion. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 33(1), 21-36.

Bin fet, J. T., Willis-Stewart, S., Lauzea, A., Greena, F., Draper, Z. A., & Calibaba, B. (2021). Understanding university students' conceptualizations and perceptions of kindness: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(4), 441-460.

Caldwell, H., & Bird, J. (2015). *Teaching with tablets*. Learning Matters.

Carroll, A. B. (1991). The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders. *Business Horizons*, 34(4), 39-48.

Creswell, J. (2014). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. Sage publishing.

Dang, A., & Nguyen, T. (2021). Valuation effect of emotionality in corporate philanthropy. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 173(1), 47-67.

Ferrell, O. C., Fraedrich, J., & Ferrell, L. (2019). *Business ethics ethical decision making and cases*. Cengage Publishing.

Giddings, B., Hopwood, B., & O'Brien, G. (2002). Environment, economy and society: Fitting them together into sustainable development. *Sustainable Development*, 10(4), 187-196.

Harvey, C., Gordon, J., & Maclean, M. (2021). The ethics of entrepreneurial philanthropy. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 171(1), 33-49.

Kindness Curriculum. (2020, November 30). *The kindness curriculum, kindness factory and Kaplan Australia and New Zealand*. <https://www.thekindnesscurriculum.com>

Peterson, C., & Seligman, E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press.

Schneewind, J. B. (1992). Autonomy, obligation, and virtue: An overview of Kant's moral philosophy. In P. Guyer (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Kant* (pp. 309-341). Cambridge University Press.

Sternberg, R. J., Kaufman, J. C., & Pretz, J. E. (2003). A propulsion module of creative leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 14(2), 455-473.

Trevino, L. K., & Nelson, K. A. (2017). *Managing business ethics: Straight talk about how to do it right*. Wiley Publishing.

Zolotoy, L., O'Sullivan, D., Seo, M. G., & Veeraraghavan, M. (2021). Mood and ethical decision making: Positive affect and corporate philanthropy. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 171(1), 189-208.