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TALES FROM THE FRONT-LINE: EXAMINING THE POTENTIAL OF CRITICAL INCIDENT VIGNETTES

(Accepted 14 January 2002)

ABSTRACT. In common with many areas of the business and management curriculum, the case study method plays a significant role in business ethics education. However, case study material in common use is dominated by well-publicised incidents of corporate misconduct often providing a limited insight into decision-making affecting front-line staff facing personal dilemmas in their working lives. This paper gives examples of, and examines how, critical incident vignettes (CIVs), derived from the personal reflections of students, can provide an alternative to traditional "disaster style" corporate cases. CIVs illustrate the real-life ethical dilemmas that confront front-line employees, often operating in an environment with low-levels of personal autonomy. They also highlight the factors that contribute to decision-making in such an environment, the transitory and transactional nature of many employment relationships and the evasion of moral responsibility to which this can give rise.

KEY WORDS: case studies, critical incident vignettes, personal reflections

THE DOMINANCE OF THE CASE STUDY METHOD

The case study method is one of the most distinctive elements of learning and teaching in business and management and remains widely used (Orpen, 2000; Macfarlane and Ottewill, 2001). The influential role of the Harvard Business School as a pioneer and advocate of the method has been crucial in this respect. Indeed, the use of the case study method at Harvard pre-dates the First World War (Schlossman et al., 1994). As a problem-based pedagogy, appropriate use of case studies provides a context both for the application, critique and development of theoretical concepts, and the simulation of managerial decision-making (Booth et al., 2000). It is hardly surprising those teaching within the subject area continue to regard the case study method as an exemplary practice (Ballantyne, 1999).

Case studies are also a dominant force within the teaching of business ethics and may be deployed in a similar way: to debate relevant ethical theory and provide a simulated context for managerial decision-making around ethical issues. Many of the leading business ethics texts carry collections of case studies (e.g., Hoffman and Frederick, 1995; Chryssides

Teaching Business Ethics **7:** 55–67, 2003.
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and Kaler, 1996). Moreover, Cummins' (1999) report on the state of business ethics education in the UK implies the widespread use of case studies by educators. Indeed, the complaint of business ethics educators that there is insufficient European case study material is indicative of the dependence of the teaching community on the case study as a pedagogic tool.

THE LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL CASE STUDIES

It is ironic that, overwhelmingly, business ethics case studies are illustrative of unethical corporate conduct. Indeed, they often represent inglorious examples of alleged corporate callousness surrounding events such as new product launches (e.g., the Ford Pinto or Dow and silicon breast implants) or operational disasters (e.g., the Bhopal gas leak or the *Herald of Free Enterprise* ferry tragedy). While such cases offer sobering and important lessons for students there is a danger that focusing learning on a large number of such incidents, often involving "extreme" scenarios and significant loss of life, will encourage, and, indeed, reinforce the view among learners that business practice is almost exclusively "unethical".

Striking an appropriate balance in the curriculum demands the inclusion of organisational role models, such as the British Co-operative Bank (Kitson and Campbell, 1996), and positive exemplars of business practice. Examining the impact of influential leaders and leadership styles in promoting a value-driven organisational culture can be part of this alternative agenda. Using sources such as *Stories of Virtue in Business* (Weber, 1995) can act as a counterweight to case studies illustrating unethical corporate fiascos. Getting students to examine what motivates individual leaders, for example, can facilitate discussion of virtue ethics. Cases focusing on character failure provide further variety by giving an insight into why collective decision-making can falter under competitive pressure (McCracken, Martin and Shaw, 1998).

Traditional "disaster style" case studies are, by definition, well-publicised. They also invariably involve multinationals. It is tempting for educators to use material relating to large corporations familiar to learners. However, the multinational bias in case studies to which this gives rise is at the expense of small and medium-sized organisations, together with public and voluntary sector bodies, which play a significant role in the economy and society of every country. Moreover, despite the availability of a number of well-known case studies focusing on the activities and events surrounding US multinationals good quality European case study material is in short supply (Cummins, 1999). From a European perspective, students can find it difficult to relate to the cultural context of case study

material focusing on the activities of US companies (Perkins, 2001). Using guest speakers from local SMEs can help, to some extent, to redress the bias toward large multinationals which is prominent in many areas of the business and management curriculum.

A third, important criticism of current case study material is that it tends to present material from a strategic, senior managerial perspective. Invariably, students are asked to tackle a scenario from this lofty vantage point (Badaracco and Webb, 1995). For many learners this casts them in a role with which they have little or no experience and can de-personalise the incident they are asked to analyse. Learners, for example, can see their role as managing the adverse public relations aspects of the incident rather than considering the fundamental issues. Asking students to take on this role can convey the false impression that business ethics is only about decision-making at senior management level when it just as crucially involves front-line workers making difficult choices while interacting with colleagues and customers.

Lastly, while it is not appropriate in the context of this paper to focus purely on generic criticisms of the case study method, it is salient to consider the impact of one or two of these aspects. Case studies tend to be compiled in an archival style on the basis of a range of secondary source material. The editing of this material inevitably has a significant impact on student perceptions and subsequent analysis. Acknowledging the effect of this editing process is important in itself to student learning and can be achieved via student construction of case study narratives on the same, controversial incident or examination of the differences between several analyses (e.g., the Bhopal gas leak). Students can also suffer from "case study fatigue" where their teaching and learning experience is dominated by an unremitting diet of different lengthy and detailed cases each week (Macfarlane and Ottewill, 2001). The answer to this problem is partly about varying the teaching and learning strategy via the use of role plays, for example, but it also lies in drawing more effectively on the work-related experiences of learners who can often prove a rich resource of real-life material. This strategy will be illustrated in this paper.

The factors outlined above can make it difficult for young learners, in particular, often with limited working experience, to relate to traditional cases focusing as they tend to on corporate misdemeanours at boardroom level. These cases are often derived from a social and cultural context that is "foreign" to the learner. Furthermore, even when traditional cases are set in a context to which learners can relate they can often fail to convey the full social and personal complexity of the decision-making process.

CRITICAL INCIDENT VIGNETTES

Critical incident vignettes (CIVs) consist of a personal narrative account of a particular work-based experience. Students are asked to reflect on an incident, or series of incidents, which represents, for them, an ethical dilemma. They are asked to reflect and comment on the incident and, where possible, consider how their experiences may be connected to ethical theory. In contrast with traditional case studies based on a synthesis of secondary source material, CIVs are raw, first-hand commentaries of real events affecting individuals.

CIVs are similar in some respects to "live" case studies representing as they do a real workplace circumstance. However, "live" case studies in business and management are, by definition, about current, rather than past, events and are derived mainly from senior managers representing an organisational, as opposed to essentially personal, perspective.

The five CIVs which follow represent a small sample drawn from the reflective learning logs of final year undergraduate students studying a business ethics option at a UK higher education institution during the 1999-2000 academic year (see Macfarlane, 2001). The names of individuals and real organisations have been anonymised or deleted where appropriate.

Case 1: Hands In The Till

I work as a sales assistant in a supermarket at the weekends. Four employees including myself knew that two cashiers were stealing money from the tills. We knew this because we had witnessed it on many occasions. All the girls that knew about the situation including myself decided we did not want to get involved in anything. The procedure that is undertaken when staff report their colleagues is that security usually keeps an eye on the particular person until they see the evidence for themselves. In many cases when cashiers have reported these types of incidents news usually leaks out that it was "so and so". The other cashiers will see you as a whistle blower and you are known as a big mouth. The culture in my workplace and in my department, which is checkouts, is that cashiers need to stick together and offer support to one another. It is the "us vs them" culture. Cashiers vs management.

There was one girl in the group that wanted to go tell (sic) management. She thought that is (sic) extremely wrong and she said that her conscience would not let her rest. I knew what the cashiers were doing was wrong but I didn't want to get involved. Basically the girl who wanted to tell was outnumbered, the majority wanted to keep quite (sic) and she was

the minority. This is the utilitarian theory applied to this situation. The happiness and consensus of the decision we came to outweighed the happiness of the girl who wanted to tell all. The decision received the highest expected utility. It seemed ruthless that I was prepared to turn a “blind eye” but I kept wondering whether I would of ignored this if it was my families (sic) business and found out that employees were stealing from my father. I knew that I did not really care because it was not happening directly to me and that is how the majority of cashiers knew about the situation. A Kantian would of applied the rule that the girl who wanted to tell management should of regardless of the consequences due to the fact that it is her duty.

Security officers caught the cashiers. In retrospect maybe I should have informed management about what was going on. I know that I should of done something, if the situation was reversed and I felt strongly about telling the senior members of management, how would I feel if within my heart I knew that it was the honest and right thing to and fellow colleagues were persuading me to go against everything I believed in? I don’t see myself as a bad person but this separation of working life and personal life is evident. I would never condone this in my private life, but I feel that I am a different person when I am amongst my colleagues. I am the type of person to go with the majority because I would be too scared to make the decision like that on my own. In the working environment I think that employees are influenced by each other and that was evident in the ethical situation.

Case 2: The Multi-Pack Scam

For some time, the issue of tax evasion at my place of work, a branch of a national supermarket chain, has been known about. Initially, it seemed as though it was occurring primarily due to the general manager at the time, who was using the added income from VAT (Value Added Tax) fraud to increase the store’s profitability to ensure he got a better car. However, after his demotion and the appointment of two further general managers, the activity has continued and the unethical, not to say illegal aspect, has been virtually forgotten. The tax evasion concerns the purchase of multi-packs of confectionery, which are then split up and sold individually, both to customers and in the staff canteen, so that the VAT paid is slightly less. At some time, a significant proportion of the workforce of that store have been involved in this, including myself, by helping to restock the shelves, saving the empty multi-pack wrappers for the stock control department to re-order, as the sales based ordering system did not recognise indi-

vidual confectionery items since they had been discontinued to prevent re-ordering at the checkout.

Most of those involved would have known that the practice of this was wrong, especially as the wrappers state that the product shouldn't be sold singly, but to report it would be unjustifiable. There are a number of reasons for this but my first reason for not reporting it is the upset and stress that would be caused to many members of staff, regardless of position, by getting the relevant authorities involved, as previous investigations have shown. To many employees, the supermarket provides a casual job which provides a supplement to other income or is simply pocket money for those still in education and living at home. The culture of the store would change dramatically overnight to one of distrust, fear and speculation, where rumours and counter rumours flourish. This would lead to many of the staff, particularly the older members, leaving rather than put up with such a tense environment which would disturb the balance of personalities and experience.

The wrongdoing needs to be put into perspective by addressing the role of supermarkets in the wider world. The supermarket belongs to a chain which employs thousands of people directly and indirectly in various roles, contributing both to the economy and to the individuals it employs. It has supported many charities, albeit as part of a marketing exercise. The supermarket has also played a critical role, both in exploiting British farmers and in "flying the flag" by encouraging consumers to buy British by, for example, the placement of produce in key positions. This pattern of give and take is no doubt a characteristic of the majority of businesses with the balance of ethical behaviour subject to the opinion of the observer. In the case of this supermarket, I believe that for the most part both at corporate level and branch level, the running of the business promotes social good to some degree. It is responsible for most of the time and is unethical in only a minor way. Thus, the avoidance of a relatively small part of the tax obligation must be weighed against the millions that are given directly or indirectly back to the government.

Whistle blowing is a form of disloyalty. I have been employed by the supermarket for a number of years and have had a good relationship with the managers, often receiving favours such as leave for revision. To make a complaint that is essentially a relatively petty matter would be inappropriate. I would also not want to put myself at risk.

Case 3: The Racist Boss

The time I spent working in London was for two stockbroking companies, not a profession generally perceived as ethical. The second company I worked for was relatively small with about 200 staff. Not long after I started there were rumours that the London branch was going to close down. This may account for why people were to take the attitude that they did. My manager had a team of four beneath him, including myself. I was the youngest and newest member. I had only been there a period of a few months when it was decided by "higher authorities" that a new member of staff would be required on a part-time basis. The curricula vitae began to flood in from agencies. There was a pile of about forty CVs on my manager's desk as he started to process them. He began to throw some in the bin and said that they were ones which had names that suggested they were either "pakkies or niggers". I was shocked by this. In stockbroking, office banter is part of the norm as were nicknames such as my own, "Swampy". I had encountered racism before in the work place at previous companies which were usually jokes but never such open discrimination.

My manager was not old. From my experience, I have found that those who are genuinely racist are usually of the older generation. But he was a Thatcher child, in his thirties and successful. I knew that what he was doing was wrong legally. They could have been the ideal candidate but my manager only looked at their names and then he looked no further.

Of the rest of the team no one said anything yet everyone else seemed uncomfortable. Indeed, some laughed nervously. No one said any more about the incident after it happened. Ethically, I acted incorrectly because I did not act in accordance with my beliefs. I knew this at the time. I should have asked him if he would have liked it done to him. I think and I hope that if a similar situation arose in the future I would have the strength of character to speak out. The situation taught me that it is all well and good saying that in the business environment you should act in an ethical manner but when really required to speak out very few people actually do. This situation also suggests that government legislation to prevent racism, and situations such as these occurring, is not working in reality. The world will never be free of people acting in some form of prejudicial way but more can and should be done by businesses and government. In other words, people have rights and these should be protected.

Case 4: The Tempting Gift

I am currently working for a large supermarket chain. It is nearly a year since I started work at the store. The store is located in a very busy

part of London. There is a mix of city slickers, historical landmarks and culture. This means rude business people enter the store alongside annoying American tourists who expect you to pack their bags, as well as other nationalities who expect you to know where every London landmark is located. The area around is also home to many homeless people as well as prostitutes. They often come into the store. Some steal, others do not. There is one man who I know is homeless but you would never think it to look at him. He is always clean and very cheerful whereas the others are very often miserable and smelly.

My most testing moment at the store was during this Christmas just passed. All the staff were paid the week before. I had money in the bank. Christmas eve was very exciting for me. I was planning to meet some friends after work and then go on to a club. Whilst at work I noticed that two young men were coming in at different times with the same credit/debit card. I knew instantly that the card was stolen and the two young men knew that I knew. My co-worker on the till next to me also noticed their actions. After the second time they came in I decided I had to do something. The fraudster realised I knew what he was up to so instead of running away or leaving quickly he propositioned me. He asked if I would like to get a share of the cash back he was withdrawing using the card. I was stunned and a little amused. How dare he put me in this position that I felt very tempted to take up? I admit I had to think about it but in the end I said no and told him he should go away and throw away the card. I should have called one of the managers. I do not know why I didn't. The man left but his friend came back and asked if I could throw away a plastic bag he had brought in. I didn't realise what he was doing until I had the plastic bag in my hand. The bag was heavy. I shook it and inside was fifteen pounds; one ten pound note and five coins. I looked up and the man was outside watching me. From the window I read his lips "for you". I was shocked but I couldn't help smiling. Jason, the boy at the other till, also had a smile on his face and asked me to share the money with him. I didn't know what to do. I was going to put the money in the till but decided to keep it. I went to the staff room and put the money in my locker. I was excited because it meant I could have a few more drinks after work but I was also extremely disappointed with myself.

I hate the idea of those two men taking money from someone else's account. Money they haven't earned. I know how hard it is to earn money then see it disappear through bills and living necessities. I was at this point disgusted with myself. What was more scary were the consequences of not bringing the two men to the attention of security. Not only could I lose my job if the managers or police ever found out about this but they are

probably continuing committing fraud. I was so angry that I decided to give the money to Jason, the boy next to me. He couldn't stop thanking me. By giving away the money I felt I had cleansed myself. At this time all I kept thinking was "do unto others, as have done by you" (sic). I was and in some ways still am angry that I let myself be used so the two men could steal from an innocent person. I keep hoping that I am not a victim of card fraud or any other fraud that would leave me distressed. Now when people enter the store and I suspect them of doing any type of illegal or criminal activity I call a manager or alert the security guard as well as making other staff aware of the situation.

Case 5: The Deceptive Telephone Call

The ethical dilemma occurred while I was working for a large government department. The department contracted a consultancy company to control computer security and troubleshoot problems. During the time I was working there a fraud case arose concerning an employee. My managers believed that the person they suspected might have incriminating information still within his computer user area. My managers asked me if I could phone up the computer consultancy and pretend to be the person they suspected and say that I had forgotten my password so we could obtain access to his computer user area. They wanted to go behind the backs of the computer consultancy as they did not want other people finding out about the fraud case. The manager put me under pressure by stressing that it was my duty to carry out the work. I knew that he would have made life difficult for me if I hadn't done it and I couldn't afford to lose my job. After weighing up the pros and cons of making this decision I decided to carry out the request.

However, the following day threw up another ethical dilemma. The computer company, who had given me the password, phoned up my extension and explained that they knew what was going on. They wanted to know who had impersonated the person we suspected of fraud and why. The dilemma this time for me was whether I told the computer consultancy the truth and admit it was me or deny all knowledge of the situation. I felt loathed to take the blame as I had only carried out the request under a lot of pressure from my managers. I decided to deny I knew anything about it. In the end the manager decided he would take the blame for the telephone call as he felt it would be unfair for me to do so. I think the manager did the right thing by taking the blame as they didn't give me much choice as to whether to carry out their request or not.

After the dilemma was over I think I made the right decisions throughout the process. I made these decisions as it was my duty to

do what my managers asked of me. As I felt the requests were not too unreasonable I carried them out.

CLASSROOM USES

The CIVs presented above represent just a small sample from one cohort of students but they are indicative of a wider range of such "critical incidents". Some are tinged with personal regret, and even remorse with respect to actions taken (e.g., "the tempting gift") or ducked (e.g., "the racist boss"). Others justify not blowing the whistle on the basis of the self-regarding interests of the individual or group loyalty (e.g., "the multi-pack scam"). Some are naive in their application of ethical theory (e.g., "hands in the till"), others show how job insecurity affects the will to speak out (e.g., "the racist boss") or how the irresponsible exercise of managerial power can compromise the integrity of young, front-line employees (e.g., "the deceptive telephone call"). They contain many statements and assumptions about the nature and responsibilities of working life which warrant further discussion and scrutiny.

However, what all these, and other such vignettes, have in common is a raw, personal and (sometimes) reflective quality. This rawness means that CIVs have considerable potential as both a *teaching* and *learning* tool within the context of a business ethics education. Firstly, as a teaching tool they serve to illustrate the real-life ethical dilemmas that confront front-line employees, often operating in an environment with low-levels of personal autonomy. They also highlight the factors that contribute to decision-making in such an environment, the transitory and transactional nature of many employment relationships and the evasion of moral responsibility to which this can give rise. The cases provide a means by which the impact of such factors on the ethical behaviour of the individual and, in turn, the ethical performance of the organisation can be discussed and better understood in a classroom context. Such cases also place a direct and constructive value on the experiences that the learner brings with them. While the interpretation and application of ethical theory is often naive, a group of students can be asked to evaluate accuracy in this respect as part of their analysis of an anonymous case.

In practical teaching terms, the personal nature of CIVs make it better to deploy them in conjunction with techniques for fostering discussion in larger groups and as a means of drawing out an understanding of personal principles and work-related pressures which lead to decisions. Exposing one student's CIV to syndicate group discussion followed by a whole group plenary is usually inappropriate. Instead, a "pyramid" or

"snowball" technique (Gibbs, 1992) can be used. This involves getting students to initially work alone, then in pairs, then in fours and so on. For example, with CIVs this can involve asking students to initially work alone for 5 or 10 minutes to draw out common factors from their own CIV using questions such as "Identify up to 5 personal principles and/or work pressures which led you (or another key person) to take the action you (or they) did". Then, in a pair, students are asked identify the 5 most common "principles" or "pressures". This same instruction can be used as the snowball progresses helping to develop students' negotiation skills as a by-product of the exercise. The advantage of this technique is that it fosters participation and negotiation while protecting confidential details of cases. Students, though, will often choose to reveal details to their peers in order to provide context for discussion. Alternatively, a technique such as "5 minutes each way" (Gibbs, 1992) can be deployed where, working as a pair, two students take it in turns to talk uninterrupted to the other. This technique also has the advantage of promoting use of CIVs in a less public way with a follow-up plenary which again draws out principles rather than focusing on details that students would prefer to keep confidential.

Finally, CIVs, appropriately anonymised and re-cast in more succinct terms, can be deployed as scenarios for in-class questionnaires or short case studies. Their use as a research tool, as demonstrated by Clark (1966) and Stephenson et al., (1995), is also valuable in investigating differences in ethical values between individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

What is particularly powerful about CIVs though is their relevance to the working experiences of students rather than the giddy heights of the corporate boardroom. They thus provide a source of material more relevant to students with limited business experience. However, CIVs still carry important messages for more experienced learner-managers who need to understand the impact of organisational culture on the way front-line workers handle ethical dilemmas. Finally, as a teaching tool, CIVs provide an antidote to the traditional dominance of "disaster style" corporate case studies within the business ethics classroom and the tendency for such cases to adopt an organisational, rather than individual, focus for decision-making. As a personal learning tool students can derive further benefits from writing their own CIVs. They can serve as a means for learners to map their personal workplace experiences against key ethical concepts while writing reflectively about a significant workplace incident and can also prove a cathartic experience for learners. They can help students to

"exorcise" a significant event in their working lives and enable them to reflect on how they would act in the future given a recurrence of a similar set of circumstances.

In deploying CIVs in the classroom, however, a word of warning is in order. They tend to contain confidential material of a highly personal nature. This means that they need to be handled with a skill and sensitivity that does not compromise the privacy of the individual. However, CIVs offer unique insights into real world ethical dilemmas and the constraints and pressures that shape decision-making in the workplace in a way which few "disaster style" case studies can convey. The insights they provide into the "real" world of the corporation can help to re-balance the traditional emphasis within business ethics education on case studies focusing on dilemmas facing the senior management team of large corporations. As a teaching tool for the classroom, and as a learning tool for individual students, they offer considerable potential.

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