

Universal values: Do they exist? Can one code fit all?

by Suzanne Ross

In her work at St James Ethics Centre, Suzi Ross is often asked could codes be derived from universal values. Here she presents some of the voices in this discussion.

In his 1993 book *The Executives' Compass*, O'Toole writes of "two blunt words" which he read on the cover of *Newsweek* that he felt encapsulate the central leadership question: "Whose Values?".

For me this raises a number of questions: Do leaders have the right to impose their values on others? Do these values change with each new CEO? If we impose our values on others, will they truly be lived within the organisation?

O'Toole suggests that business executives find themselves drawn into "value wars" in an environment of "countless and conflicting opinions about what is right and wrong."

O'Toole further comments that "in order not to get stuck in this quagmire of complexity, business managers pursue an approach that seems sensible: they simplify." Another response to dealing with complexity and uncertainty is to search for the 'quick fix'.

I personally would argue that something that by its very nature is complex and uncertain will not have a quick fix.

Peter Bartos ('Managing Performance. How to avoid stumbling' in *Management*, AIM, June 1995) highlights the dysfunctionality of the 'quick fix' attitude by listing three wishes of the pressured business person, manifesting their desire for an easy life: "Let it solve all my problems", "Let it install and maintain itself with minimal or no effort" and "Let my will be done".

In the mid-'90s, client requests that came to St James Ethics Centre demonstrated desires for simplistic approaches and products. They seemed to assume that there was a universal set of values and a code that fitted all. They would ask for an 'off-the-shelf code' to adapt for their organisation. It was not uncommon at the time that a few 'nice words' were chosen by 'someone at the top' and ended up as wallpaper values (published and placed on walls). There was a misguided assumption that these words would be lived by the organisation and ensure a sound ethical culture.

Schwartz (*Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol 59) suggests that a corporate code of ethics "based merely on the desired moral values of the individual CEO, the legal department or even an ethics consultant, is arguably a relativist document that merely suits the objectives of the author."

Hugh Mackay wrote in a 1991 edition of *City Ethics*, the precursor to *Living Ethics*, that “The fact that there is no universal agreement about what is right and wrong in every case is the very reason why, in business as elsewhere, the promotion of vigorous debate about ethical issues is the only way to ensure that our capacity for moral judgement is enlarged.”

Collins and Porras (*Harvard Business Review*, September-October, 1996) agree that there is no universally right set of values and suggest that “a great company” will decide “what values it holds to be core, largely independent of current environment, competitive requirements, or management fads.”

In contrast to the idea that there is no ‘right set of values’ Schwartz attempts to establish “core universal moral values by which corporate codes of ethics can be ethically constructed and evaluated.” Schwartz uses three sources for his research: companies’ codes of ethics; global codes of ethics; and business ethics literature. From these he extracts six universal moral values: trustworthiness; respect; responsibility; fairness; caring; and citizenship.

I would argue that even if we could agree on core values and principles, at least two possible questions remain:

1. Has the ‘clustering’ to elicit ‘universals’ reduced or enhanced meaning?
2. When these universal values compete, which values have priority?

The codes that emerge from the work of St James Ethics Centre in assisting organisations to develop or review their ethical frameworks produce quite diverse results - one code does not seem to fit all.

The motivation for developing the code is important. L’Etang (*Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol 11) writes: “If the motive behind a code of ethics is to improve the image of the company in order to enhance the marketability of its products then the code is unethical in Kantian terms.” L’Etang contends that “If codes are arrived at through discussion then they may represent the general will of the organisation.” It is clear that the process of developing the code is crucial to both its relevance and acceptance within the organisation(1).

An interesting question: what if the process leads to Schwartz’s universal values? One could argue along the lines of TS Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

At St James Ethics Centre we have found that there is no ‘quick fix’ for the development of corporate values, principles and codes. Perhaps Einstein can have the final word. He said, “It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.”

