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Don't Be Afraid to Use the "M" Word

Skills and Professional Development





Morality — the “M” word — is not one that you hear bandied about in the workplace very often. In companies with ethical corporate cultures, you’ll hear phrases like: “We need to do what’s right,” “We need to meet our ethical obligations,” or “We comply with our legal obligations.” But you rarely hear someone say: “We have a moral obligation to do that.” Many companies have “codes of business ethics,” but I don’t know of any that have “codes of business morality.”

I suppose there are several reasons for this general aversion to using the “M” word in the workplace. Some may believe that business professionals should be excused from certain moral obligations universally recognized in other aspects of our lives outside the rough and tumble business world. This crowd might maintain that business is like poker, where it is understood that the rules of the game include permission to engage in some measure of deception or sharp dealing to “win.” Of course, those who act on the belief that they enjoy a “moral holiday” when at work are playing a dangerous game. By flouting basic moral tenets like honesty and fairness, they risk their professional careers, their freedom, and their sacred honor. But even those willing to occasionally take such risks can’t seriously maintain that such a moral holiday for business is absolute. Even the most Machiavellian business professional would likely concede, for example, that it would be immoral for a competitor to bomb their factory and kill them and their family to gain a competitive advantage. At least, I hope they would.

I think there is another more common reason why most people avoid using the “M” word at work. In our culture, the word “morality” is closely tied to religious doctrines. Religions promote their sect’s moral code to help believers live a holy life or win eternal salvation. Such religious goals are at variance with for-profit businesses whose principle aim is to provide goods and services and create value for their stakeholders. In addition, because religious doctrines vary widely, businesses comprising employees from multiple faiths rightly operate on a secular basis. They welcome people of all religions but insist that employees keep their religions to themselves and not proselytize or attempt to impose their beliefs on others in the workplace.

And so, we avoid using the “M” word either because we think it has little place in business to begin with, or out of fear that we may be perceived as grounding our business judgments on our religious convictions. Although it is essential for businesses to operate on a secular basis, if for no other reason to avoid disharmony in the workplace, the fear of using the “M” word is unfounded.

First, this “M” word phobia is based upon an unnecessarily narrow definition of the word “morality.” According to that great oracle of the internet, Wikipedia, the word morality is derived from the Latin word “moralitas” meaning “manner, character, proper behavior.” It is also synonymous with the word “ethics” that is generally defined as the systematic study of what moral behavior is. Given this fact, you should not have any greater aversion to using the word “moral” at work than you do in using the word “ethics” because they relate to the same thing — proper behavior. The two words can and should be used interchangeably. There is no difference semantically between making an “ethical” decision and making a “moral” decision.

It is also important to recognize that religions are only one of many institutions that define or provide guidance on what constitutes “proper behavior.” Governments, communities, and organizations of all kinds, including businesses, play a significant role in drawing “moral chalk lines” for individuals subject to their influence. This, of course, is what laws and company policies are designed to do. They expressly attempt to define proper behavior and set forth penalties for improper or amoral behavior.

This is not to suggest that laws or company policies always draw the lines in the right place. History has proven time and again that this is not the case. Instead, the point is that when we talk about moral conduct in a business context, we are not necessarily espousing a religious position. Instead, we can be articulating our reasoned judgment based on a set of commonly held values espoused in the law, community norms, industry ethics standards, and company policies.

Second, morality and moral decision-making clearly plays an important part role in business. Regardless of what language is used to describe it, business professionals make moral judgments every day. Take, for example, routine business issues such as: “How safe is ‘safe enough?’” regarding products or working conditions; “How clean is ‘clean enough?’” regarding environmental emissions; and “What constitutes a fair wage?” All of these, and the myriad other similar issues business professionals face, call for moral judgments. In such cases, business professionals are trying to discern proper behavior while considering the facts and their ethical/moral obligations in the circumstances.

So, the next time you get a chance to use the “M” word at work, don’t be afraid. If you get raised eyebrows, help your colleagues understand that you are not expressing your religious beliefs. Instead, you are merely providing your best business judgment based on the facts and relevant legal and ethical principles. Of course, to prove that you are not merely expressing a religious belief, you need to be prepared to properly defend your moral judgments with sound reasoning. Judging by the

number of firms that have been caught engaging in massive legal scandals in the first 19 years of this millennium, sound reasoning and more frequent use of the “M” word can’t happen soon enough.

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