ABSTRACT. This paper describes how a family of ethical concepts can be taught through focusing on how values play out at the most basic level—in the sphere of everyday business interactions. If our goal is to create an “ethical business culture,” it makes sense to attend to our treatment of one another in the simplest, and most frequently occurring of duties. The paper examines the kinds of daily interactions common to many business settings—attending meetings, sharing information, taking phone calls, utilizing common resources—and demonstrates how these practices set up encounters in which lived moral values can make a difference in the quality of life, morale, and company productivity.

KEY WORDS: applied ethics, business etiquette, everyday ethics, professionalism

In a workshop prior to the Fifth Annual International Conference Promoting Business Ethics (Chicago, 1998), Kenneth Goodpaster proposed that the contents of “Ethics 101” are more effectively taught when integrated into the Business curriculum. I propose to take this movement towards the “grass roots” a step further by reviewing some of the ethical issues which intervene, not at the top echelons of management, but on the everyday level of the typical business employee.

My paper, echoing the title of a popular Ethics anthology (Sommers and Sommers, 1997), describes how a family of ethical concepts can be taught through focusing on how values play out at the most basic level—in the sphere of everyday business interactions. If our goal is to create an “ethical business culture,” it makes sense to attend to our treatment of one another in the simplest, and most frequently occurring of duties—in the places where “culture” is formed. Enhancing moral discernment on this level, which I take to be the foundation of a full-fledged notion of “professionalism,” serves as a prelude to implementing ethical concepts in the more complicated settings and dilemma scenarios prominent in most Business Ethics texts.

1. What motivated this paper?

The inspiration for this paper derives from two sources. One was the experience of my childhood at the dinner table, during which I frequently heard the horror stories told by my father about his daily experience in the business where he worked. My father, who is not a “whiner” by nature, would relate tales of the insensitivity of supervisors, the dishonesty of fellow employees, rampant laziness and short-cutting, avoidance of responsibility and, in general, a level of inconsiderateness which reached the level of intolerability. Changing jobs several times throughout his career meant changes in salary, job description, perquisites and office, but never did he seem to be able to escape the bone-headed bosses, rude secretaries, out to lunch technical staff, and a whole host of other characters no one would want to be around. If the image of “Dilbert” hasn’t come to mind yet, it should. Is not the popularity of this comic strip a register of how pervasive are these kinds of

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behavior (and personality-types) in many business organizations?

A second motivation was the opportunity to deliver a “one shot” ethics lecture/vaccination to a group of Business majors several years back. In the quest for a good opening, I stumbled upon Robert Fulghum’s insightful book, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Fulghum offers a list of the “essential skills” we all (hopefully) mastered at the beginning of our education (Fulghum, 1993/1988, pp. 4–5). They include:

- Don’t take things that aren’t yours
- Play fair
- Don’t hit people
- Clean up your own mess
- Put things back where you found them
- Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody
- Take a nap every afternoon
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you
- Flush

Several of these principles apply neatly to traditional business ethics concerns about marketing, product safety, environmental hazards and corporate responsibility (one wonders, though, whether the application of “flush” would be “shred”). It also seems that these principles lend themselves even more naturally to the everyday level of conduct. This incited thinking about how business ethics values play out in the interpersonal playpen we call “the office.” I sensed that much of the action occurs below the radar of human resources and organizational management theory, down at the level of the conduct the teacher doesn’t see and nobody bothers to monitor.

This paper attempts no empirical claims about the connection between conduct on the everyday level and decision-making in crucial situations. It hypothesizes that there is a correlation between what could be called “everyday niceties” and the kinds of situations normally discussed in business ethics classes. This would serve as a fruitful research topic for moral educators or social psychologists. The paper at most attempts a conceptual link between everyday conduct and “showtime” ethical decision-making. It makes sense heuristically to hold that individuals who are insensitive, mistreating or abusing others on a daily level, would find it easier to do so in more momentous ethical decisions such as whether to insure consumer safety, telling the truth to customers, cheating suppliers, or choosing whether to obey the law. Treating other people decently on a daily basis may not guarantee making the right decision when the heat is on, but at least a habit of caring about one’s acquaintances would be well-established. Such a habit would pre-install a panoply of developed cognitive skills and emotional sensitivities to assist moral decision-making when facing the tough cases. I have argued elsewhere (Chismar, unpublished conference presentation, 1999) that, particularly in intercultural settings, the moral virtues require the development of such “associate virtues” if they are to operate in full strength.

2. Everyday ethics

My thesis, simply put, is that we each have a moral obligation to treat each other with respect and sensitivity on an everyday level. Ethics begins at home, so to speak, which in this case is at the office with one’s co-workers. Such ordinary and unremarkable kinds of daily interactions common to many business settings as holding meetings, sharing information, taking phone calls, and utilizing common resources set up encounters in which lived moral values can make a difference in the quality of life, morale, and perhaps even company productivity. They are where we practice being moral, or, alternatively, where we develop bad habits of insensitivity which may set us up for more serious moral shortcomings.

This assertion, challenges the conventional sharp distinction between ethics and etiquette. Shaw and Berry, for example, in the seventh edition of Moral Issues in Business, distinguish between moral and nonmoral standards (Shaw and Berry, 1999, pp. 5–6). Into the latter compartment they place codes of etiquette. “Any special code of behavior or courtesy” may serve as a rule of etiquette. Such standards denote “prescriptions for socially acceptable behavior.” As examples of “good” etiquette, the authors cite saying “please” and “thank you,” holding a door open, writing