

Engineering Ethics

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Abstract - In my presentation, I discuss the general rules of social communication in commercial and entrepreneurial activities. I also pay close attention to international customs/cultures. I primarily focus on countries which have close business ties with Czech business/institutions and vice versa. This course, which deals with these problems, familiarizes the student with general rules of social communication: etiquette of business meetings and business trips, and business writing skills. Also, I will deal with particular countries, including etiquette for specific activities and situations.

Index Terms - Business, Conduct, Ethics, Etiquette.

ENGINEERING ETHICS

Every person evaluates his own behaviour as well as behaviour of other people, he grants it some kind of ethical aspect, he states what behaviour is good and what is not. This evaluation is mostly purely subjective, what is considered good by me may not be considered the same by others. The matter in question is the responsibility a person has for his own behaviour and deeds on one hand and on the other hand responsibility as such, responsibility in general. I regret to say that there is not much responsibility in recent society. People do not keep their word, their deals, their promises. Responsibility in these matters has been vanishing.

Having in mind the complexity of this problem in the field of ethics, we decided to set up our Business Ethics course and by doing so we would like to shed some light onto business, communication, and professional paths of present society.

Our aim is to solve or at least depict moral issues which are characteristic for commercial and entrepreneurial activities.

This topic is rather new in the Czech Republic and has been taught at some universities since 1992. Business Ethics is not to be confused with legal aspects of undertaking. There is a false idea, that a company is acting moral if it is acting in accordance with the law. But the law itself does not state what is moral. To give an example, contracts and deals are the base of any business activity and the ethical approach is not only to be seen in the fact that contracts must be discharged but also in the answer to the question whether there subjects lie in the field of morals. It is important to highlight that it would be impossible to carry on with business activities without the fundamental principles: equity and fairness. To achieve international prestige and acknowledgement we all desire, it is necessary to follow the way of ethics and morals.

Knowing that evolution of ethical behaviour in undertaking is a long-term process, we would like to help our students a little on their way and start them up in the right direction. For this purpose students have been offered one-semester course called Business Ethics for ten years so far. We decided to open this course to respond to the demand among the students. The interest in this subject has been growing ever since.

An outstanding Czech sociologist Jan Keller says in one of his books that the most important milestone in the development of acceptable kinds of behaviour is the period when the Middle-Age society changed into Modern society, when fierce knights started to turn into gentle courtiers. If we are to use this terminology, we could say that our aim is to educate people in such a way that in the end they would make perfect courtiers who control their affects perfectly.

The Business Ethics course starts with the basics of social conduct - students are familiarized with its methods, conventions, and rules. Social conduct is not being taught at our primary and secondary schools, children are educated in this respect mostly by their parents and possibly by the social group they live in. Only business academy and hotel college students gain some knowledge in this field.

The way of teaching ethics is a matter of question. The topic itself tends to turn the lecture into a stream of moralizing and sermonizing. Based on my own experience I would prefer to set examples of different situations and let the students themselves decide how to approach these issues with the teacher only coaching them into the right direction. Model situations are received well by the students. The rules of etiquette are obligable only to those who are willing to accept them. Law must be obeyed by all, however the ethical rules are, contrary to the law, not possible to be enforced. Teacher can only appeal to the students' sense of moral behaviour. If he starts to moralize his chances of meeting the right goal are getting low. In case the etiquette topics are presented in an interesting way that would lead to specific situations, it is possible to encourage students' attention and keep them cooperating. On the other hand we have to agree with the sociologist Jan Keller, who states that even a person unfamiliar with fine manners can behave fairly while courteous behaviour can easily hide feline intentions. The liaison between fairness and courtesy is quite difficult, which we always highlight.

Professional attitude is required in almost every aspect of human life. It should be commonplace in behaviour as well. As goes for entrepreneurial activities, we must bear in mind that there already exist certain rules concerning the formal side of human interaction, that it is necessary to know them and use them. A good professional should master them in order to gain self-confidence.

The feedback of lectures on manners among the students is very positive. The course comprises topics such as greetings, introducing, dressing, table manners, behaving at various events, etiquette of travelling, private and business visits as well as telephone communication etiquette. It happens far too often that students ask for a specific piece of advice on behaving in situations they come across in the course of their social life. Education in this field is a necessity.

Big deal of attention is being paid to the language itself with focus on writing skills, this item being the first thing a prospective business partner comes into contact with and evaluates us according to the skills we perform. Electronic mail enables people quicker and easier communication. On the other hand email writers feel at ease when communicating and the email language very often does not match business correspondence standards. Moreover, some writers express themselves in a very low language. These language drawbacks are not an outcome of inferior technology but the writer's own language incompetence. The students are informed on different skills in writing and business correspondence.

Rhetoric almost completely vanished from schools, colleges, and universities. We devote a substantial part of our course to rhetoric, as a person who is able to express himself in a sophisticated way is also capable of sophisticated manners in all other respects.

Another part of the course is devoted to the organizational part of a business meeting, arranging visits, events, dealing with faux pas, etc. Many of our students appreciated our teaching them how to write a CV and a covering letter as this is vital important when applying for a new job.

Concerning business relations it is also important to know the manners and people's mentality in corresponding countries. Understanding and complying with national mentality is to a great extent a matter of sensibility, tact, and a lot of experience. The knowledge of the mentality is fundamental to social relations among people, it is essential for the understanding among people of different cultures. For these reasons we subsumed basic differences in some European cultures into the course.

The person who is following development in the field of ethics and etiquette can see a turn for the better as goes for the etiquette but not with respect to ethics. The core of the issue is not only direct responsibility to individuals but also responsibility for the future. In our course we would like to contribute to positive progress in both fields.

As a complement to our paper we made a short documentary in which we would like to show how the students are thinking about the necessity of leading ethical rules into their private and social lives. The requirement is to start the evaluation of ethical behaviour with our own selves.