Living With Yourself

Introduction

Ethics in the Workplace

We seem to have turned a corner (if not our backs) on the 'greed is good' money-driven pragmatism that is often associated with the Thatcher era. We want to punish businesses if we feel they are not paying a fair amount of tax.

In this new environment, businesses cannot afford to be seen to care only about making money or crushing the opposition, and they need to demonstrate a suitable commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility. Community Interest Companies are springing up all over the place. Many people choose to work, often for less money than they could earn elsewhere, for companies which are doing good as well as generating a profit.

The Amateur Ethicist

There is a growing widespread acknowledgement that ethics are important – not just in business, but in many areas of life. However, for many people, the way they approach ethics is very similar to the way they approach their computer's operating system – they recognise it is important, but have no desire to know what is going on under the cover, or understand the issues embedded in its construction and operation.

Everybody is, of necessity, an amateur ethicist, in much the same way that everybody is an amateur philosopher. While we can safely ignore most of the traditional philosophical questions, we cannot ignore the ethical ones: lives and careers can be destroyed by ethical failures, and those failures can occur when we give due care and attention to the human and ethical issues we face. Even if we ignore that risk, a life fully lived requires us to engage with the ethical challenges which arise, just as it requires us to engage with the interpersonal challenges and the technical challenges.

Someone with a limited understanding of operating systems may think it is obvious what an operating system needs to do, and which one to choose. In a similar way, people sometimes think that ethical choices are binary (either good or bad) and simple (so all good people agree on the right thing to do, even if it is difficult). But in the real world, ethical choices are often between different shades of grey, and good people often disagree about which choice is the best. Good people even disagree about how to evaluate the choice: it is on the basis of the motivation or the grounds or the outcome?

The right choice is not always obvious (despite the many newspaper headlines which scream the opposite); and many people lack both the tools and the language to engage with these issues personally and corporately, to arrive at a solution which works as well as possible for all those involved, and to communicate both the decision and the reasons for it to those who want a different outcome.

Thinking About Our Choices

We cannot outsource our ethics, so we need to spend some time and effort to think about the choices we face, and their consequences – for us, for the people around us, for society as a whole and for the world we live in.

I cannot tell people what to do, but I can offer two things.

- Firstly, I can help people recognise the ethical dimension of their work – not only the obvious choices, but the systems and structures we build and the assumptions which underpin them.
- Secondly, I can offer tools to help them engage in an appropriate and constructive way, balancing moral imperatives along with the other constraints, such as time and emotional capacity.

Being able to live with yourself is not the only aspect of a sustainable lifestyle, but it is one essential part.