Course Syllabus

Managerial Ethics: Lessons from Literature and Film
B65.2115.30
Spring 2006
Mondays 6:00pm-9:00pm
February 6-March 27, 2006 (6 sessions)
Instructor: Professor Les B. Levi
e-mail: llevi@stern.nyu.edu

Overview

This course builds on ideas put forward in Professional Responsibility (B02.3101), the prerequisite. During the semester we will examine seminal works of literature and film that explore the social and moral context of business and businessmen, and ethical norms that have emerged over time. Assignments will include selections from novels, short stories, plays and films, and an effort will be made to relate the ethical issues portrayed to contemporary experience—from headline corporate news to students’ own experience in the workplace. Altogether, this course is designed to help students gain a better understanding of business ethics by recognizing the timeless nature of the challenges that managers and business professionals face in the marketplace. Guest speakers will also participate.

Requirements

Week to Week
Class participation in this course is important, so students must come prepared by carefully reading and analyzing the assigned materials. Please review the Discussion Questions before each class and be prepared to respond—students will be chosen at random to comment upon. Discussions of the readings and films, as well as other in-class activities, are an essential part of the course.

Students are required to keep a weekly “course journal” of reflections and ideas. After each of the first five class sessions, the student should write a 2-3 page informal journal entry, exploring one or more of the works analyzed in the class session and reacting to the class discussion and activities, with specific reference to the student’s professional life. Hardcopies should be submitted the next class session. Grades of the best four journal entries will be counted toward the final grade.

Final Paper

A paper of about 8-10 pages will be due March 31st and must be submitted electronically. That paper should focus on a novel, short story, play or film, and should draw upon the issues and themes discussed during the semester. (Note: The subject of the paper must be submitted for approval by March 6th.)
Much of the reading material will be available on the course website (designated B for online Blackboard) and in several paperbacks that will be available for purchase in the bookstore. For film assignments, DVDs will also be available for purchase through Amazon.com or another on-line provider, although students may choose to rent at a local video store. Film clips will be used in class.

Books you will need (should be available at NYU Bookstore):
- Sinclair Lewis, If I Were Boss: The Early Business Stories (1920s); (paperback; Southern Illinois University Press, 1997)

Films you will need to view (local video store or order from Amazon.com):
- Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold, Blue Vinyl (2001) [available through NYU]
- Oliver Stone’s Wall Street (1987)
- Billy Wilder, The Apartment (1960)
- Glengarry Glen Ross, the film version of David Mamet’s play directed by James Foley (1992)

Determining grades:
The weighting of student grades will be as follows:
  Class participation  20%
  Personal Journals   40%
  Term paper          40%

Class #1-Feb. 6th: Beginning the dialogue on business ethics: classical and religious influences on business conduct and the evolution toward later literature and film; depictions of the businessman in literature and film. Understanding “character.”

Overview of the course’s objectives: to explore how literature and film offer insight into ethical and moral issues of business and management. Review of key themes we will be discussing during the semester. This first class examines early literature that has shaped beliefs related to business and commerce in Western thinking, particularly in the Bible and the classics. We also look ahead to poems, plays and films of the modern age that iconify some of these ethical precepts and views of business. Additionally, we will discuss current events—in particular, the Enron trial and the company’s executives and corporate culture.

Assignments (these will be available on the Blackboard course web-site (B) and are required reading before the first class meets):
- Excerpt from an essay by Professor Edwin M. Hartman, “Can We Teach Character? An Aristotelian Answer” (B)
- Selections from the Old Testament (Genesis: Jacob & Esau, Jacob & Laban, Joseph) (B)
Discussion Questions:

1) Before the class, think of works of literature and film that you have read or seen in which businessmen and managers are depicted. What ethical issues, if any, are raised in these works? How are businessmen represented?

2) In reading the works of antiquity assigned for this class, certain character types emerge, representing types of leaders and business professionals that one encounters today. In our class discussion, try to draw parallels.

3) While the assigned portions of the Bible for this week are regarded as Holy Scripture by major religions, they are also narratives that describe the conduct of individuals, often in business relationships. For example, Jacob, the third patriarch, gains his father’s blessing and later is given property by his father-in-law, Laban, through certain means. How would you characterize Jacob’s behavior? Laban’s behavior?

4) Trimalchio, the noveau riche ex-slave in Petronious’ mock-epic, is a character type that we meet over and over again in later literature and film, as well as in real life. Who would you include as Trimalchio’s latter day descendents?

5) How is “character” described in Professor Hartman’s essay? Does he believe “character” can change, or be changed? How is “character” presented and developed in “Winter Dreams”?

6) Three figures dominate the Enron scandal—Ken Lay, Jeff Skilling and Andy Fastow. How would you describe the “character” of each of these men? Their moral and ethical compass? How would they—in fact, how do they—each describe themselves and their actions?

Class #2-Feb. 13th: Before the 20th century: establishing ethical frameworks for understanding business and management; are ethical managers good managers? Or are effective leaders necessarily ethical leaders?

The tools of effective management and leadership: Few leaders are as effective in motivating their followers as Shakespeare’s Henry V in the play of that name. From the reckless prodigal prince of the Henry IV plays, Hal emerges here as a powerful King who routs the French armies at Agincourt against staggering odds. As the consummate motivator, Henry is a prototype of the effective, though cunning, corporate manager, and looks ahead to contemporary counterparts—the motivators, leaders and super-salesmen of later fiction and film. Other leader-protagonists (both good and evil) from later literature and film will also be discussed.
Assignments:
William Shakespeare, *Henry V*. Ed. and intro. by Claire McEachern. (The Pelican paperback edition, 1999) Please focus especially on the following speeches/soliloquy:
- Henry’s message to the French prince (Act I, sc.2 – pp. 17ff)
- “Once unto the breach…” Henry’s rallying cry at the siege of Harfleur (Act III, sc.1 – pp. 42ff)
- Henry’s appeal to the Governor of Harfleur (Act III, sc.3 – pp. 48ff)
- King’s reflection on his right to France and throne (Act IV, sc.1 – pp. 76-79)
- Battle of Agincourt: Henry’s exhortation to his outnumbered troops “If we are marked to die, we are enow…” (Act IV, sc.3 – pp. 82-84)


Discussion Questions:

1) Justification for Henry’s celebrated cause—the conquest of France—is articulated early in the play. Is this justification convincing? Do the Archbishops who “bless” Henry’s right to acquire France have anything to gain?

2) Some ambiguity surrounds Henry V’s right to the throne since it was only made possible by the overthrow and execution of King Richard II by Henry’s father years earlier. (See Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *Henry IV, 1 & 2*.) How does this moral ambiguity emerge in the play if it does at all? (see soliloquy IV.1)

3) Henry’s motivating speech to his men on the eve of the battle of Agincourt (Act IV, sc.3) is considered one of the greatest examples of the rhetoric of persuasion. Success in leadership often depends on persuasive rhetoric. Analyze the speech carefully in the context of the play. Review it from a variety of different perspectives, and determine if the speech has an ethical basis.

4) How does Henry’s Agincourt speech compare to his earlier speech exhorting his men to attack Harfleur (Act III, sc. 1)? Henry’s threats to the governor of Harfleur (Act III, sc. 3)?

5) Overall, how would you view Henry V as a leader? Is he an ethical leader?

Class #3-Feb. 27th: The corporation and civic responsibility; corporate liability and cover-up; documentary filmmakers as activists promoting change

Corporations have both legal and ethical obligations to society, and when these are violated, writers and filmmakers take notice. Companies deal with the damaging though perhaps unintended consequences of doing business in different ways. Issues like pollution, worker injury and product liability—and how business responds—are recurring themes in modern literature. 19th century novelists like Charles Dickens railed against the exploitation of child workers and the crippling poverty of the urban working class—all evil consequences of the new Industrial Age. Themes like these would endure
throughout 20th century literature and film as well, as seen in works depicting the hazardous meatpacking plants in turn-of-the-century Chicago (Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*), the deadly consequences of shipping defective airplane parts in World War II (Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons*), and the ongoing corporate cover-up of tobacco’s proven toxicity (Michael Mann’s *The Insider*). Indeed, nowhere is a world of unrestrained corporate greed more graphically depicted than in the fantasy sequence of Frank Capra’s Christmas classic, *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

More recently, filmmaker Judith Helfand undertook a journey in search of the truth about vinyl, the world's second largest selling plastic. The result is the award-winning *Blue Vinyl* (2001), a witty, Michael Moore-style documentary that employs a literary narrative framework to deliver solid investigative reporting—and some shocking conclusions.

Guest speaker will be Judith Gelfand, co-director, co-producer and star of *Blue Vinyl*.

Assignments:
Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold, *Blue Vinyl* (2001) *(please view the movie before class and be prepared to discuss with the director—copies of the VHS tape will be distributed in class #1)*

Discussion Questions:

1. *Blue Vinyl* is a documentary (as defined below), yet it "borrows" from other genres as well. How is the documentary structured? Like a play? A short story? A "60 Minutes" type news report? An anecdote? A home movie? Is it a "slice of life"? Why does the director call it a "toxic comedy"?

2. What are the issues presented in *Blue Vinyl*? Are they presented in a "black and white" fashion? Does the director admit any shades of gray?

3. Implicit in the film are the ethical implications of certain actions, both corporate actions and individual actions. Explain what the actions are and their ethical implications.

4. The following is one viewer's reaction to the director/narrator, Judith Helfand:

*Judith neither claims to be, nor qualifies, as a "spokesperson" for the anti-PVC movement. Her intent was to galvanize consumers. It was not to portray herself as an expert or spokesperson. If you found yourself interested by the film and wanting to learn more about PVCs and its impact on you, then she accomplished what she set out to do. Afterall, I do not think that her gripe is specific to PVCs, her gripe is about corporate abuse of the publics trust. (e.g. asbestos, DES, PVC, and on and on)*

Comment on this. What is the point of view of the narrator? Who is the narrator?
5. Look at the vinyl industry's point of view by visiting their website, www.vinylinfo.org. The vinyl industry created another site, aboutbluevinyl.org, which addresses specific allegations in the film. Please read through that website before the class. Also, there is a site for anti-vinyl activists, myhouseisyourhouse.org, that was put in place after the release of the film. Please review that site as well.

Class #4 - Mar. 6th: Financial markets and insider trading; American entrepreneurship and speculation; do periods of rapid economic expansion necessarily lead to moral compromise? The recent Wall Street research scandals.

Manipulation, corruption and self-dealing have always plagued the financial markets and periodically erupt into scandal, which in turn prompts regulatory reform. Corrupt financiers like Anthony Trollope’s Augustus Melmotte, Theodore Dreiser’s Frank Cowperwood, and Oliver Stone’s Gordon Gekko had—and will continue to have—real-life counterparts. When and how they cross the line, and how others become complicit in their crimes, is a recurring literary theme. We will focus on the movie Wall Street.

We will also touch on literature focused on speculative excess (read the Frank Norris short story). Also, through the hundreds of popular stories and novels of Horatio Alger during the second half of the 19th century, the American public was served up a model for ethical business behavior against which the robber barons, speculators, and get-rich-quick quacks were measured.

Guest speaker this class will be Jack Grubman, the high profile Wall Street telecommunications analyst who rose to prominence in the 1990s and became central to the controversy surrounding “sell-side” research.

Assignments:
Oliver Stone’s Wall Street (1987) (please view the movie before class and be prepared to discuss)
Horatio Alger, Jr.: “Thomas Mordaunt's Investment “(1865) (B)
Recent articles on Jack Grubman; Eliot Spitzer’s crackdown on Wall Street research (B)

Discussion Questions:

1. The movie Wall Street has been described as a bildungsroman or “coming of age” story of the young Bud Fox, a recent NYU MBA. Explain.

2. Set in the raging bull market of the 1980s, Wall Street dramatizes financial market abuses that violate both ethical and legal guidelines. Describe these.
3. The economist Joseph Schumpeter has emphasized how “creative destruction” is necessary for continued economic growth. Do Gekko and others like him embody that positive element in a dynamic economy? Or are they simply bad?

4. For many artists, depicting evil is more fascinating than depicting good. Does that describe Oliver Stone’s quandary in making the film?

5. What are the ethical/legal issues surrounding Gordon Gekko’s market activity in the following companies: Teldar Paper, Annacot Steel, and Bluestar Airlines.

[more discussion questions to come]

**Class #5- Mar. 20th:** The 20th century corporation and the “Organization Man”; rather than religion or government, the corporation comes to dictate rules of conduct and ethical guidelines. Dysfunctional corporate cultures.

The modern corporation emerges in the 20th century and with it comes an array of moral and ethical issues concerning an individual’s rights and prerogatives versus the interests of the corporation. The theme of corporate loyalty at the expense of personal ideals is pervasive in contemporary literature and film. The good corporate citizen—or what may be cynically viewed as the practitioner of “Babbitry,” after the Sinclair Lewis character—is simultaneously viewed as both the pillar of the community and as the gutless conformist who sacrifices individuality and a personal sense of right and wrong in order to belong. As well, not all corporate cultures are good or ethical.

Assignments:
Selections from Sinclair Lewis, *If I Were Boss: The Early Business Stories* (1920s); (paperback; Southern Illinois University Press, 1997); read introduction; “If I Were Boss” and “The Whisperer.”
Selections from Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (1922) (B)
Billy Wilder, *The Apartment* (1960) (please view the movie before class and be prepared to discuss)

[Discussion Questions to follow]

**Class #6-Mar. 27th:** Sales ethics; management motivation, and corporate loyalty

Selling is the cornerstone of business—whether it’s selling goods or services or, for the entrepreneur, selling an idea. In America, far back in time, “Yankee peddlers” roamed the 13 colonies selling housewares and leaving a legacy of traveling salesman jokes. Their lineal descendant is Willy Loman, a 20th century Everyman who struggles in vain
to achieve the American dream. Arthur Miller’s tragic hero is destroyed by the harsh environment of modern commerce together with the indifference of corporate management. Willy’s heirs include David Mamet’s burnt-out real estate salesmen in Glengarry Glen Ross and the ruthless brokers in Boiler Room. These works raise important issues about sales ethics and corporate responsibility.

Film clips from Arthur Miller, Death of A Salesman – a film by Volker Schlondorf (1985) and Ben Younger’s Boiler Room (2000) will be shown in class.

Assignments:
Glengarry Glen Ross, the film version of David Mamet’s play directed by James Foley (1992) (please view the movie before class and be prepared to discuss)
Selections from Sinclair Lewis, If I Were Boss: The Early Business Stories (paperback); read “Honesty—If Possible.”

Optional: David Mamet, Glengarry Glen Ross (the text of the play) (paperback; Grove Press, 1984)
Arthur Miller’s Death of A Salesman.

[Discussion Questions to follow]