

Teaching Managers to Do Policy Analysis The Case of Corporate Bribery

In our experience the formal training of most managers (whether it be in management per se or in some related field such as industrial engineering) has prepared them for solving "academic exercises" or what we prefer to call "well-structured problems." What they have not been formally prepared for and what they are required to solve on the job are real-world or "ill-structured problems."¹

Real-World Problem Solving

For the past five years we have been engaged in a variety of systematic efforts to teach managers how to solve real-world problems. As such we are the first to acknowledge the strangeness of our enterprise. Teaching managers how to solve real-world problems is like teaching fish how to swim. Managers are continually beset with real problems; these are precisely the kinds of problems with which they are charged all the time. Why, then, would they require training for that which is their assigned mission and responsibility? The answer is that while managers may be charged with the responsibility of handling real-world problems, few have been adequately and systematically trained to handle them. Handling such problems adequately requires a deep appreciation of the differences between

real-world problems on the one hand and academic exercises on the other.² And it requires a deep appreciation of the various aspects of the problem-solving process itself.³

Well-structured problems possess the general characteristics of being (a) easily definable, (b) consensual, and (c) amenable to standardized, already existing, and easily available methods of problem formulation (or specification), solution, and implementation. Well-structured problems are, in other words, problems for which one can secure relatively widespread agreement as to the basic nature of the problem and for which there exist generally agreed upon and already existing methods of solution.

Ill-structured problems, on the other hand, are (a) hard to define, (b) conflict producing, and (c) not generally amenable to standardized solution techniques. Ill-structured problems vary greatly in their basic nature, depending upon who is defining them and from which particular disciplinary or functional perspective (or specialty). Another way to express this is that well-structured problems are relatively independent of the personality of the analyst or decision maker; decision makers of differing backgrounds and outlook will all tend to define the problem in the same way. Ill-structured problems, how-

ever, tend *not* to be independent of either the personality or the background of the particular decision maker. Analysts of different persuasion and background will tend to define the same problem in very different ways.

This is not to say that problems are *either* well-structured *or* ill-structured. All problems are a mixture of both types. It is thus a matter of a continuum existing between them rather than a strict either/or. Some problems are more well-structured than others, and vice versa. More importantly, however, there is growing evidence that the higher one goes in an organization the more one is faced with solving ill-structured problems rather than with well-structured ones. The ability to handle ill-structured problems thus becomes even more vital to the manager.⁴

There are other important reasons for considering ill-structured problems. For example, social and managerial thinkers such as Ackoff, Churchman, Rittel, and Vickers⁵ argue that *all* of the fundamental problems facing society (such as education, transportation, health, welfare, crime, pollution, abortion) are basically ill-structured in their makeup. Not only is there widespread disagreement as to the underlying "nature" of these problems but no less disagreement regarding their "solution." Indeed, if universal agreement or widespread consensus were the sole criterion for social action on these problems, most proposed programs or plans for treatment would be bound to fail. For this and other reasons, these important social thinkers argue that the attempt to secure widespread agreement as to the "basic nature" of these problems is not

only misguided but is actually harmful in the sense that agreement may remove from conscious consideration important dimensions of "the problem." Instead, what they argue is that we need new ways (methodologies) for airing our disagreements and for getting at what lies beneath them. In short, what we need are new ways of handling important social and managerial problems that regard disagreement between differing views of a problem as a potential benefit in problem solving.

For this reason, we have been engaged in teaching managers (a) to become consciously aware first of all of the differences in problem-solving styles between them; (b) to be able to appreciate and to tolerate styles different from their own; and (c) to encourage them to formulate important problems they are currently facing in their own organizations from the vantage point of all the various styles.⁶ The prime purpose is to show managers that problem forming (how a problem is first formulated) is one of the most important and yet most neglected aspects of the problem-solving process; that is, how a problem is first formulated is one of the most important determinants of its subsequent solution. We have found that the most powerful way of illustrating this is to have managers formulate a common problem from the most diverse perspectives and then require them to build the best set of arguments they can for every one of their formulations. Such a process represents a dialectical approach to problem solving. It treats the formulation, and not merely the solution, to important problems or issues as an exercise in policy analysis.⁷ That is, it behooves the decision maker to examine explicitly the most diverse formulations of a problem before the decision maker decides which formulation is the one he or she ought to pursue subsequently. As the eminent statistician John Tukey put it, "Far better an approximate solution to the right problem than an exact solution to the wrong one." In a complex world where absolutes rarely exist, there may be no better way of determining which problem is the "right" one we ought to be solving than by systematically comparing at least two of the most strongly competing formulations of the same problem or issue.⁸ Such a procedure explicitly brings to the surface underlying assumptions for conscious inspection.

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Table 1. Averages of Scores of Students and Managers to Marketing Ethics and Bribery Questionnaires

| | Graduates | | | Undergraduates | | | Grads. | Under- | Statistically Different? |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| | EMBA's (N=21) | MBA's (N=28) | Statistically Different? | Minn. (N=40) | Women (N=27) | Statistically Different? | EMBA's + MBA's (N=49) | grads. Minn. + Women (N=67) | |
| Total marketing ethics score | 80.5 | 79.0 | No | 85.9 | 87.5 | No | 79.6 | 86.5 | Yes* |
| Ethics of bribery | 4.14 _a | 5.21 | Yes* | 5.70 | 5.82 | No | 4.76 | 5.75 | Yes** |
| Necessity of bribery | 2.91 _b | 3.61 | No | 3.55 | 4.41 | Yes* | 3.31 | 3.96 | Yes* |
| Widespread | 2.33 _c | 2.39 | No | 2.20 | 2.25 | No | 2.37 | 2.22 | No |
| Usefulness | 2.71 _d | 3.21 | No | 2.92 | 2.74 | No | 3.00 | 2.85 | No |
| Contemptuous | 4.76 _e | 4.39 | No | 3.45 | 3.11 | No | 4.55 | 3.31 | Yes*** |

- a. 7-point Likert scale where 1 = ethical; 7 = unethical.
- b. 7-point Likert scale where 1 = necessary; 7 = unnecessary.
- c. 7-point Likert scale where 1 = widespread; 7 = limited.
- d. 7-point Likert scale where 1 = useful; 7 = useless.
- e. 7-point Likert scale where 1 = contemptuous; 7 = sympathetic.

* p < 0.05
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Corporate Bribery

In addition to real problems in their own organizations, we have also given managers and business students a variety of ill-structured problems to work on for illustrative and training purposes. One of the most fascinating problems in this regard has concerned the issue of corporate bribery. About two years ago when the issue first began to break, we started exploring the attitudes of our students toward it. We believe that the process we followed not only illuminates some previously unexplored aspects of an important social issue like bribery but that it illustrates as well an important way of approaching such issues.

Previous research in the area of ethics in marketing shows that the longer a student has majored in business the more inclined he or she is to view various purposefully constructed and ethically ambiguous situations as ethical.⁹ For example, in this research a student is presented with twenty items or situations of the following kind and then asked to rate each on a seven-point scale, where 1 represents "ethical" and 7 represents "unethical":

A large automotive manufacturer has found a way to reduce automotive pollution by 70 percent. However,

this device would increase costs by \$250 per car and place the firm at a competitive disadvantage. Rather than introduce and actively promote the device, the manufacturer decided to wait until legislative demands make such devices necessary on all automobiles.

The more "ethical" a student sees this practice, the lower the number he or she checks; the more "unethical," the higher the number.

As part of a series of normal classroom exercises on corporate policy and problem solving, various groups of students and managers were asked to fill out the aforementioned series of twenty marketing ethics items. From this exercise one can determine an average "ethics score" for each of the various groups. Immediately after completing this exercise we then asked the various groups to consider the following statement:

In recent months, some high-ranking officials of various large corporations have admitted publicly that they have engaged in the payment of bribes and political contributions to the officials of certain foreign governments so that they could do business in those countries.

Each student was asked to respond to the following questions: (1) on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 represents "ethical" and 7 represents "unethical," how *ethical* do you consider the above practice to be? (2) How *necessary* do you consider this practice to be in the conduct of business (where 1 represents "necessary" and

Table 2. A Composite Dialectic Over All Groups (N=116)

| Type of Argument | Frequency of Argument | Most General and Frequent Arguments <i>For</i> Bribery | Frequency of Argument | Most General and Frequent Arguments <i>Against</i> Bribery |
|------------------|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|--|
| A | 73 | It is <i>necessary</i> for profits, for business, in order to do business. | 40 | It is <i>illegal</i> in this country. |
| B | 39 | <i>Everybody does it</i> ; it will happen anyway. | 34 | <i>Don't compromise</i> your own values; stand on what you think is right. |
| C | 31 | It is <i>accepted ethical practice</i> in many countries; it is expected, normal practice. | 21 | It goes against your personal ethics; you <i>should not compromise</i> your own beliefs. |
| D | 27 | It is <i>profitable</i> ; making money comes before morality. | 15 | <i>Morality and ethics come before profit</i> . |
| E | 17 | <i>It exposes world markets</i> . | 12 | <i>We should not deal with corrupt government</i> . |
| F | 12 | <i>It protects investments</i> from nationalization. | 11 | <i>Such demands once started never stop</i> . |

7 "unnecessary")? (3) How *widespread* do you feel such practices are? Do you feel they are limited to a few corporations or are they actually more widespread than one would like to be (1 represents "widespread" and 7 "limited")? (4) How useful do you feel such practices are (1 represents "useful" and 7 "useless")? (5) How do you *feel* toward someone who has engaged in this practice (1, "contemptuous"; 7, "sympathetic")?

Finally, each student was asked to construct two dialectical policy statements with regard to the issue. That is, each student was asked to write out side by side on directly opposite halves of a series of pages all the best arguments he or she could think of *for* engaging in bribery and all the best arguments *against* engaging in it. The first dialectic was written out individually; the second dialectic was written in small groups of four to six students. The purpose of the first dialectic was to get each student to develop his or her individual perspective on it; the purpose of the group dialectic exercise was to demonstrate forcefully to each individual how much individual perspectives differed and to see if the individuals could at least come together enough to form a synthesis of their individual *pro* and *con* positions. They were only asked to form a group *pro* position and a group *con* position. They were not asked to take the next and much more difficult step of forming a synthesis that would attempt to integrate and to reconcile the *pro*

with the *con* position. Because of its difficulty, this was to be left for much later exercises.

A total of 116 management students were involved; 67 were undergraduate students; 49 were graduate students. The composition of the undergraduate sample was as follows: twenty-seven female business majors from a small elite Eastern and predominantly women's college were involved. The average age of this group was in the low twenties. The second group of undergraduates was composed of forty business majors from the University of Minnesota, most of whom were males. The average age of this group was also in the low twenties. The composition of the graduate sample was as follows: the entire class of twenty-one male students enrolled in an Executive MBA (EMBA) program at the Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, was involved. The age of this group ranged from the mid-thirties to mid-forties. All were executives in major national and local corporations based in the Pittsburgh area. A number were presidents of their own companies. The remaining group of twenty-eight students were enrolled in an evening MBA program, also at the University of Pittsburgh. The ages of this group ranged from the mid-twenties to the late thirties.

Results

Table 1 displays the numerical results to the

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Each student was asked to respond to the following questions: (1) on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 represents "ethical" and 7 represents "unethical," how *ethical* do you consider the above practice to be? (2) How *necessary* do you consider this practice to be in the conduct of business (where 1 represents "necessary" and

Table 3. A Composite Dialectic For the Women Undergraduates (N=27)

| Type of Argument | Frequency of Argument | Most General and Frequent Arguments <i>For</i> Bribery | Frequency of Argument | Most General and Frequent Arguments <i>Against</i> Bribery |
|------------------|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|--|
| A | 16 | It is <i>necessary</i> for success through profits and larger markets. | 16 | It is <i>illegal, immoral, and unethical</i> . |
| B | 9 | <i>Everybody does it</i> ; if you don't someone else will; there will always be someone who offers a bribe and someone who takes it; why fight the inevitable. | 8 | <i>You must take a stand for morality, honesty, and ethical behavior</i> ; corporations should set a special example, strike a blow for honesty, take the lead in stopping this. Be your own person; do what is right. |
| C | 6 | It <i>helps other countries</i> ; it increases employment, reduces poverty, helps friendly regimes. | 5 | Those receiving bribes are the <i>only ones who benefit</i> , not the constituents or customers. |
| D | 5 | <i>In many countries bribes are expected</i> and people are insulted if you don't offer them; it is normal practice and part of everyday life in many places. | 3 | It <i>creates dependence on corrupt individuals</i> and countries; it conflicts with out ethics; someone must lead the way and be the first to stop. |
| E | 7 | It <i>yields greater returns</i> to stockholders and more customers. | 6 | It <i>deceives stockholders</i> and passes costs on to the customers; represents an unauthorized risk. |

questionnaires for the various groups. Row 1, for instance, shows the scores of the various groups to the total marketing ethics questionnaire. A person's total score is obtained by merely adding the scores to each of the twenty items. Since the responses to each individual item can vary between 1 (ethical) and 7 (unethical), the total scores range between a low of 20 and a high of 140. It will be noted that the average of all of the scores of the EMBA's is very close to what one would get if he checked the middle point, or 4, on each of the twenty scales.

The second and third columns compare the scores of the graduate students (managers) as individual groups, while the fifth and sixth columns compare the scores of the undergraduate students as individual groups. Columns 4 and 7 report the results of statistical analyses.¹⁰ With the exception of row 2 for the graduates and row 3 for the undergraduates, there are essentially no statistically significant differences between the graduates taken as a single group and the undergraduates considered as a single group. Thus, for all practical purposes the scores of the graduates may be lumped together to form one group. The same is true of the undergraduates.

When this is done, columns 8, 9, and 10 show that there are statistically significant differences between the graduates and the undergraduates in four out of the six questionnaires. Thus, for example, the undergraduates as a group view the twenty marketing situations as significantly more *unethical* than the graduates do. The undergraduates also see it as significantly less necessary. And finally, they would be significantly more contemptuous of someone who had engaged in bribery than the graduates.

Even more interesting, as one looks at columns 2, 3, 5, and 6, there emerges a weak but discernible pattern. As one moves across the table from the EMBA's to the women undergraduates, one finds that the EMBA's are more approving or at least less condemning of bribery than the MBAs, who in turn are less condemning than the Minnesota undergraduates, who are in turn less condemning than the women.

Table 2 presents a composite dialectic of the most frequently appearing pro and con arguments appearing in the dialectics of all the groups. Tables 2 and 3 show clearly that the single most frequently used argument to justify bribery was "necessity."

Table 4. A Particular Dialectic from a Single Five Person Group of EMBA's

| Order of Argument | Arguments <i>For</i> Bribery | Arguments <i>Against</i> Bribery |
|-------------------|--|--|
| 1. | Pragmatism. | Bribes are inherently wrong and cannot be accepted under any circumstances. |
| 2. | Ethical standards in the country in which it is practiced are different. | Bribes cannot be considered ethical regardless of how other cultures see it. |
| 3. | Bribes are forms of commissions, taxes, or compensations for conducting business between cultures. | Bribes defeat the world trade equilibrium. |
| 4. | The practice is widespread and socially accepted. | There are alternatives to bribes by working on a national approach versus working with individuals. |
| 5. | Cultural norms determine what's right and/or wrong; it is unrealistic to select one set of norms for all operating conditions. | Bribery yields short-range benefits by mortgaging the future. It is not adequate payment for the value received. |
| 6. | Foreign business is in the national interest of the U.S. | Foreign business is not the best solution to the problem of international trade. |
| 7. | Paying bribes is no different than settling strikes with unions for higher wages or fringe benefits. | There is nothing which compels corporations to enter into unethical practices. |
| 8. | What does ethics have to do with doing business? | Business should be based on ethics. |
| 9. | Business cannot exist on a completely ethical basis. | Economic gain should not take priority over cultural or moral good. |
| 10. | — | Adverse publicity. |
| 11. | — | Against the common good and public policy. |
| 12. | — | Bribes lead to other more costly and more unethical practices in the future. |

Tables 3 and 4 help to show that the strong differences in questionnaire responses between the EMBA's and the undergraduate women carry over to the dialectics as well. Indeed, the strongest differences occurred again between the EMBA's and the undergraduate women. In general, the dialectics of the EMBA's show a much greater preoccupation with technical factors; for example, the dialectics of the EMBA's are much more likely to be concerned with economic factors, on either side of the argument. The dialectics of the women undergraduates, on the other hand, are much more concerned with morality, the basic "rightness" or "wrongness" of the action, than with whether it is profitable or not. They are also much more vocal and extreme in declaring their opposition to the practice; for example, "I personally think such things are disgusting." Statements such as these were by no means rare. Indeed, the arguments of the women undergraduates were sprinkled with many more "I's" and "we's" throughout than those of other

respondents. The general tone was one of extreme moral disapprobation of the act.

Implications and Conclusions

There are two particularly important implications of our results that warrant discussion. The first implication has to do with the issue of bribery itself. The second has to do with the dialectic as an appropriate and emerging methodology for treating ill-structured issues. If anything, we have been arguing all along that these two seemingly disparate topics have a lot more to do with one another than is apparent at first glance.

Consider the results on bribery. They are disturbing to say the least. We were personally disheartened to find so many—if only for the sake of an argument—who were willing to justify such an onerous practice on the grounds of "everybody does it." Such responses raise the question of what we as educators can do, if

anything, to instill a greater sense of morality into the day-to-day practice of business. If the prevailing and general attitude is one of "everybody does it," there may indeed be little we can do. The time spent in a classroom is far too short to counter the extensive and extended pressures of day-to-day contact on the job. Particularly disturbing in this regard is the finding that the greater one's contact with the business world, the more sympathetic one's view is likely to be toward bribery.

This leads us to the role of the dialectic in policy formation in specific and as a shaper of attitudes in general. It has been our experience that a dialectical method of examining important issues not only leads to a deeper understanding of the many factors involved in a problem (and hence to a richer resultant policy) but that it leads to a deeper appreciation of both the issues and the processes of policy formation in a psychological sense. Our point is that even if a manager is not sensitive to the moral dimensions of an issue like bribery, he ought at least to be sensitive to the policy implications of it. He ought at least to ask himself what is the worst that can happen to him if he engages in it. This is one of the strongest elements in favor of a dialectical method of treating issues. It forces the analyst to consider unpleasant issues on the opposing side, which by their nature of being on the "opposing side," one is less inclined to raise.

None of this is intended to imply that a dialectical method of policy formation is a magic cure-all for the complex problems of management. As always, there are no substitutes for wisdom and experience. For example, the manner in which an experienced analyst would use the dialectic is very different from the ways in which our students used it. An experienced analyst would not only raise, among other things, the questions listed below, but he or she would attempt to relate the responses to each question to one another in a comprehensive and holistic way. The experienced analyst would attempt to form and to analyze a number of alternate policies with regard to the issue. The questions he or she would raise are:

1. How is the nature of the business we are in currently likely to be affected by bribery?

future businesses?

2. Under which conditions will it affect and how will it affect the market for our product?
3. How will it affect our short-term and long-run image?
4. How will bribery affect the nature of our corporation; our internal management philosophy?
5. How will it affect the quality and the nature of our control over the corporation?
6. How will bribery affect the kinds of employees we have now and are likely to have in the future?
7. Will we have to hire a different breed of employees than we have now if we engage in bribery?
8. How will bribery affect the kinds of customers and clients we attract and wish to attract?
9. How will bribery affect our competitors and the relationships we have with them?
10. Will it intensify our competition?
11. Will it make it easier or harder for our competition?
12. What will bribery do to us as an institution?
13. What will bribery do to us as human beings?
14. Will it erode away our "moral fiber"?
15. How will bribery alter or affect the general or specific characteristics of the market for our goals, services, and products?
16. How will bribery affect the status and the quality of our R&D efforts, with regard to new products, innovation, and new market penetration?
17. How will bribery affect and be affected by the geographical characteristics of our subsidiaries or branch offices?
18. Are we the kind of company that wants to be identified with this kind of practice?

In the opinion of the authors, these are the questions we should be training our students to ask of themselves and of others. Most of all, we believe that the field of management studies is ripe for a revolution that combines the quantitative skills and thrust of the sixties with the hopefully emerging new qualitative methodologies of the seventies and eighties. We not only need to study more important issues like bribery, but as we have argued, we need to develop *new policy-relevant ways* of studying them.

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