

Student Role-Play Simulation

1. Read the brief case description.
2. Answer questions for clarification from the class.
3. Break the class into two groups: participants and observers.
4. *Observers* will try to identify what ethical orientation each of the group members represents, their individual decision-making processes, and what that means in light of their potential decision making strategies.
5. *Participants* will enact (role play) one of the group roles. Each participant will be given a unique character to play and special information that they may only share during the conversation. If possible, one option is to assign the simulation roles based on the personal ethical orientations of each class participant. I.e., if a student sees himself as dogmatic and inflexible, s/he may be assigned a deontological/absolutist role, someone whose preference is getting a problem solved might be a satisficer. Students can be identified based on responses to questions about the previous ethical orientations module, or through class discussion. Do not make public who is playing which role.
6. Have the students convene the meeting and begin dealing with the “crisis.” As they talk, stop the discussion form time to time and ask the audience questions:
 - Q: Have you figured out anyone’s ethical orientation yet?
 - Q: What is each person’s dominant incentive?
 - Q: What decision-making strategies do various interlocutors prefer?
 - Q: Is the group gathering relevant information or just talking?
 - Q: What are some of the heuristics and biases that people have displayed?
7. Conclude with a discussion about the overall activity and what was learned. Ultimately the goals are threefold: (1) for students to understand more about their own ethical decisions; (2) for students to be better at understanding how the personal beliefs and values of others influences their decisions; and (3) for students to become more adept at ethical group decision making, rather than simply taking the first option that comes along. Discussion questions might include:
 - Q: How does understanding the ethical orientations of the other members help you?
 - Q: How does understanding how people make their own decisions help?
 - Q: How can you use this insight to improve future groups problem solving situations or deal with ethical issues in the future?

Case Study

Your company is one of the nations leading e-retailers with more than 200,000 employees. Located in Seattle, and recently valued at 250 billion dollars by Forbes, you CEO is one of the five richest people on the planet. With a global reputation, your organization recently surpassed Wal-Mart in value, and just completed a new office complex for 50,000 employees.

Your organization is also known for its corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices that include donating a portion of profits to charity, quickly resolving customer and client complaints, and offering employees a large cash sum if they want to quit each year. A very competitive organization, your company values include: “customer obsession, ownership, invent and simplify, are right a lot, learn and be curious, hire and develop the best, insist on the highest standards, think big, bias for action, frugality, earn trust, dive deep, have backbone, disagree and commit, deliver results.”

Your organization has recently been brought under the media spotlight for its harsh treatment of employees at all levels of the organizational hierarchy from workers in shipping and packaging, to senior management. According to a recent exposé published in the New York Times (NYT), the everyday working conditions for floor workers is both physically challenging and mentally stressful for all but the youngest and most physically fit employees.

In terms of how managers and supervisors are treated the NYT article suggested that employees are encouraged to work late, e-mails arrive past midnight, followed by text messages asking for a response if one is not sent. Employees also complained that the corporate culture encourages people to “tear apart the ideas of others” at meetings, and the internal phone directory “instructs colleagues on how to send secret feedback to one another’s bosses.” The company also conducts an annual culling, firing workers who have been identified as weak. Even sick workers “who suffered from cancer, miscarriages and other personal crises” were fired. As one senior marketer who left after only two years said, “Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk.” The NYT exposé also included other issues that included a culture of ignoring sexual assault of employees, and harassment and mistreatment at all level of the organizational hierarchy.

Scientific management principles (Taylorism, Fordism, etc.) from the turn of the century are the reason behind the Darwinian employee treatment. Scientific management calls for the use of meticulous measurements of employee activities from time spent on computers, to time spent assembling customer orders. Based on the data gathered, employees are expected to perform at the level required or are fired for underperformance. In support of the current system, the CEO him/herself has spoken negatively about the lax, “country club” employee culture across the river at Microsoft, suggesting that if that ever happened at your organization “we would die.”

The CEOs response to the NYT article was dismissive, e-mailing company employees and telling them to read the article, and stating that the situations described in the article does not resemble the company that s/he knows. Former employees are forbidden from speaking about the company or talking to the press. Indeed, only a few employees in the company are authorized to talk to the press. Very few former employees speak well of the company culture, which can be blamed for an assortment of physical

and emotional harms, but many employees still praise the opportunities to excel that the company offers.

Your task is to discuss and analyze the situation from a communication and public relations standpoint. What should the organization do? Assume that you have been gathered by an enterprising communication manager eager to succeed to deal with the issue. What part does organizational climate play? Is this a crisis? The CEO essentially ignored the problem with minimal comment so there are not yet any serious sales consequences, but what about brand value? Word on the street is that many people have stopped shopping with your company over the treatment of employees. What about from a CSR standpoint? If a company does not violate the law and tries to serve the interest of customers and clients, gives money to charity, etc. but also abuses their employees, is such behavior still corporate social responsibility?

Some members of your class will be assigned roles to play in the discussion where they are provided with ethical and personal decision making information. If you are one of those selected to take part in the discussion, review your character carefully, take notes, and make an effort to respond as s/he would under the circumstances. If you are a member of the class observing the discussion, your job is to try and understand the ethical and decision making strategies of each member of the group, and to be able to explain how you could draw upon that knowledge as part of an effective decision-making process.

Characters

Participant 1: Situationalist.

Participant 2: Absolutist.

Participant 3: Categorical Imperative.

Participant 4: Communitarianism.

Participant 5: Deontology, or Duty.

Participant 6: Dialogue.

Participant 7: The “Golden Mean.”

Participant 8: Reciprocal Favoritism, or “The Golden Rule.”

Participant 9: Utilitarianism

Participant 1: Situationalist

You called your communication colleagues together for the meeting. You were not told to, but that is actually consistent with the organizational culture.

You have been with the company for about 18-months so you are still thoroughly under the spell of the work 'till you drop, reward excellence, company mantra. You personally believe that most of the people who spoke to the NYT were just complainers because they were fired or underperformed: lazy or sour grapes.

Ultimately, you want to discuss how best to respond to the media justifying the corporate culture and celebrating all the good things the company does, like its entrepreneurial spirit, productivity, technological and business innovativeness, etc. You genuinely believe this now (even if in a few years you might not).

Dominant Incentive: Your dominant incentive is status and promotion.

Heuristics and biases: In the past, you have had success with using social media to share an organization's message. Your bias is toward propaganda and one-way communication rather than changing the company climate. You have found that allowing outsiders to express their views is often counterproductive.

Base Rate Error: You tend to believe your own experiences and reject the data that contradicts your experiences. Although you are good at interpreting marketing and sales data.

Participant 2: Absolutist

You have been with the company for about 18-months and you believe that what the company is doing is wrong (i.e., treating people badly and pitting people against each other). However, you also believe in loyalty and will not take any actions that are against the company.

Ultimately, you want to find a way to improve the working conditions while still maintaining the atmosphere of innovation, etc. that has made your company great. You support changes but only insofar as they do not pose a risk to the organization.

Dominant Incentive: You believe that hard work should be rewarded, and that your company rewards innovators and those who work hard. You remember your teachers telling you that you might work 60 or 80-hour weeks sometimes, and be an call 24-hours a day for your organization, so you do not have a problem with that part of the company climate. Ultimately you see this position as a stepping-stone to something better in a year, so you do not want to risk damaging your current position.

Heuristics and biases: In the past, you have had success by encouraging your employees and mentoring them. You know that many people do not do that, but in your division, things are slower paced and you try to help each-other. Your bias is toward collaboration rather than competition and you believe the company could be stronger if people actually worked together more.

Base Rate Error: You believe in people and not numbers and believe that someone who is weaker can be made stronger if they are given a chance.

Participant 3: Categorical Imperative

You are concerned about how people are treated. You believe that it is easy for the CEO who is one of the richest people in the world to say that people should do what he wants, but believe that it does not improve the lives of the employees and ultimately is harmful to the organization.

You have been with the company for about 5-years and have had no success changing things. You believe that the culture of the company reported by the NYT is true, and that treating people as interchangeable and replaceable is wrong.

Ultimately, you are willing to do what it takes, even share information with the media (something you have not done before), because you think the company is being run by a dictator [note: it should go without saying that whistle blowers usually do not openly share their intentions in public, so you would be careful about what you say].

Dominant Incentive: Your dominant incentive is to reform the company, even if it costs you your job.

Heuristics and biases: In the past you have seen little change take place because people worked from within. This is why you are at this meeting and willing to take the risk of talking about changing the company culture. Biases: You prefer a work environment that is nurturing and supportive and have found your workplace repugnant for several years.

Base Rate Error: You are largely immune to the Base rate Error and find data more compelling than people's personal stories. Although you might discount a few dozen employees' dissatisfaction as sour-grapes, especially in a company with several hundred thousand employees, you find the trends that show discontent across the company, data about the high churn (turnover) rate, and reports of people actually being harmed because of inhumane working conditions to be incontrovertible evidence that there is a problem.

Participant 4: Communitarian

As a communitarian you are interested in improving the overall structure of organizational life. Your job keeps you too busy to play a role in your own, actual, family and physical community where your husband/wife and children live, so you are interested in creating a place that is valuable to everyone at your workplace. While you do believe in the organizational model of competitiveness, you also believe that people need to understand the role that they play in the larger community better and take responsibility for their actions without blaming others and backstabbing them to achieve one's goals.

You have been at the organization for seven years, longer than most people. Ultimately, you want to build community among employees that teaches self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and eschews backstabbing and blaming others for failures. People should not be fired for screwing up, as long as it is not too big, but neither should they see it as acceptable. Also, the idea of seeing people's mistakes as "screwing up" is not a problem for you, people should acknowledge their mistakes and work to fix them.

Dominant Incentive: Your dominant personal incentive is organizational success. But your ultimate goal is to change the workplace and teach people to be more responsible. A bit less risk-taking, and more thoughtful about the consequences of their actions.

Heuristics and biases: In the past you have found data and facts to be valuable and useful planning and coordination tools. You are more comfortable with data than with actually challenging people, which you only do using data, often to correct their erroneous statements or facts in examples. Your biases are against selfish individualists who exploit the organizational system for personal gain at the expense of other good and hardworking employees.

Base Rate Error: As mentioned, you are a data person. You are also relationship driven and slow to trust outsiders. Your relationships are with the other long-term members of the organization. You have many long-time friends at the organization, but would be reluctant to make a decision because of one (or a few) person's experiences.

Participant 5: Deontology, or Duty

To call you a spy would not be accurate. You want what is best for the company and so you agreed to come to this meeting. But, if you believe for a second that the members of the group want to harm the CEO or other organizational leaders, you would call the company hotline in an instant and report them all.

You have been with the company for about 3-years so you know the lay of the land and have already outlasted a lot of people who started with you. You once met the CEO in person at an event and are in awe of his personal success.

Ultimately, you are loyal to the company. It was your first real job and you feel like you owe them a lot. Additionally, you value loyalty and see yourself as a model organizational member.

Dominant Incentive: To do your job as well as possible and advance. You do not have much of a personal or social life, you mostly work and work hard. The pay is good, you save your money and take advantage of travel opportunities when they arise. You invest wisely and in general are completely loyal to the company. You are entrepreneurial, however, you also follow orders. You would fire everyone in the room if you were told to without a moment's hesitation or remorse if it meant that you might be promoted.

Heuristics and biases: You are an innovator, not afraid to take risks to achieve your goals. You have found that trying novel ideas often results in success. Your bias is toward order and consistency. You are also all about "making the trains run on time."

Base Rate Error: You believe in numbers, seeing people as problems to be solved.

Participant 6: Dialogue

You believe in the value of communication and understanding. You also find the existing organizational climate that revolves around attacking people, hurting people, and viewing people as fungible (replaceable) to be a poor organizational model. You believe that everyone's ideas are valuable, and although people are sometimes wrong, if they are open-minded they can grow stronger.

You have been with the company for about a year and in that time have participated in a number of meetings that achieved their goals only by accident, spending more time attacking people personally than evaluating possible solutions. Your preference is for open, but civilized, communication.

Ultimately, you want to improve the work climate of the company and would like to see the CEO replaced or retire. You believe that the company could be greater than it is if he moved on.

Dominant Incentive: Your dominant incentive is to achieve a healthy work/life balance. You currently work too hard and have little time to spend with friends and family. That was fine in the beginning, but after a year, you do not believe you can keep it up much longer. You grow angrier every day.

Heuristics and biases: You believe in democratic, respectful, group interactions. You do not believe that your way of seeing the world, or the CEO's way, or the people in marketing's way, is the one right way. You believe that negotiated and contingent truths are the path to making the best decisions. Your bias is toward relationships and friendships.

Base Rate Error: You often fall victim to the base rate error, believing that you can best know people by talking to them and trusting them. Over the years, however, you have often been wrong about people, yet you persist in believing in individuals' ability to change. You also believe that the abundant quantitative data about your customers purchase preferences could be improved by more humanistic methods rather than more numerical data.

Participant 7: The “Golden Mean”

You seek balance between competing positions and ideologies. You have few strong preferences (keep your job, do your job, help the company succeed), but what you do know is that the reaction to the media story needs to be measured and balanced. The organizations side needs to come through, as well as a sense that the organization cares about others.

You have been with the company for about 12-years and your solution to problems is always to balance interests. You are very good at dealing with the “cold and prickly” (the opposite of the warm and fuzzy feeling of getting what you want) problems in the company, which is why you have stayed so long. You have an uncanny ability to let unpleasant personalities and behaviors just slide off you back, and are highly skilled at proposing mutually acceptable but not very creative solutions to problems.

Ultimately, you want to hold out another year until retirement and do not really want to make waves or work any harder than you do now.

Dominant Incentive: Your dominant incentive is to avoid making waves. You really derive no special joy from work or your company and are just plugging along.

Heuristics and biases: Solutions are solved for you by moving to the middle. You do not take risks, and you do not try to force your goals on others, but neither do you let yourself get taken advantage of. You have made good deals with bad people and organizations because you are not concerned with their personalities. Although you once worked to achieve the best decisions you could, your current bias is toward satisficing.

Base Rate Error: You need to see numbers to make decisions. You do not take people at their word, until you have seen the data to back it up. Similarly, you are about transparency and accuracy.

Participant 8: Reciprocal Favoritism, or “The Golden Rule”

You have been with the company for about 9-months. In that time, you have witnessed the callous organizational culture that exists and have helped work to improve the workplace for many of the companies warehouse employees. You have also supported organizational initiatives designed to reduce competition among managers and senior leaders.

You are not sure how your colleagues or supervisor perceives you. You have been told that you need to be more aggressive and less passive, but your performance seems to have been adequate.

Ultimately, you want employees to not be afraid of getting fired, and to feel good about their jobs and making the lives of customers better. You believe in the companies vision: “to be earth's most customer-centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online,” you just do not believe that you are currently on the path to achieve it.

Dominant Incentives: Fairness, trust, forgiveness.

Heuristics and biases: Your past experience has taught you to never say anything bad about others. You embody the “if you cannot say anything nice, don’t say anything at all” adage, so you do not attack people in meetings, etc. When people attack you, you let it go. Your bias is toward collaboration and trust.

Base Rate Error: You want to believe the best in people and give everyone another chance. Statistical data is useful for understanding collectives like customers, but not for understanding individuals.

Participant 9: Utilitarianism

You actually buy into the corporate mantra that you are there to help the customer, accepting the corporate vision statement at face value: “Our vision is to be earth's most customer-centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online.” You are also addicted to wanting to be successful at the company, and see that almost as a drug that you can get self-worth from. You came to the meeting to see if there were any ideas you could use to do your job better, but do not believe that the system is broken. The needs of the millions of customers served outweigh the needs of the employees.

You have been with the company for about two years and are still excited by your job and the opportunities.

Ultimately, you want to become a senior manager in charge of your own area.

Dominant Incentive: Your dominant personal incentive is status and promotion. However, the community you support and identify with are the customers and believe that everything you do, you do for them.

Heuristics and biases: You largely embrace the system that treats people as interchangeable since it allows for the best talent to cycle through and your identification is with the customers. When you are promoting someone, you are first honest with them and tell him/her about how they have failed, so they can improve, before you tell them they are being promoted. Your bias is toward competition and a Darwinian model of organizational success.

Base Rate Error: You are a data person. If you bring in new blood, you get new ideas. Everyone has a story and everyone cries when you tell him/her how s/he failed, or you have to fire someone. That is just part of life.