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Manufacturing Morals

The Values of Silence in Business School Education

Michel Anteby • University of Chicago Press © 2013 • 248 pages

Take-Aways

- The Harvard Business School attempts to establish a moral foundation implicitly through its everyday routine, an approach called “vocal silence.”
- By exercising unspoken standards, the School aims to create a faculty and student culture that promotes “autonomy,” flexibility, “discretion” and creativity.
- The School deliberately maintains a cozy, orderly campus environment separate from the outside world.
- The curriculum and the way teachers present lessons are regimented. Classes are rigidly formatted; a mandatory grading curve sorts out the top 20% of students.
- Instructors must demonstrate “academic and managerial relevance.” The School culls faculty members who fail to achieve tenure.
- Four characteristics of vocal silence define how it can transform your organization:
 - First, it offers a “gradual approach to attaining higher morals.”
 - Second, it demands majority agreement among the members of your company culture.
 - Third, it encourages free thinking and introspection, thus requiring openness to change.
 - Finally, using silence to attain goals identifies organizations as “works in progress.”

Recommendation

If you think that morals and ethics should be – or could be – inculcated into an organization’s culture by being part of the unspoken basic foundation of daily life, then the Harvard Business School may be the place for you. Can creating a setting for MBA students where ethical training is part of the air they breathe actually shape future executives with staunch, internal moral standards? Harvard associate business professor Michel Anteby thinks so. He explains how the Harvard Business School tacitly instills an ethical foundation it hopes will guide its students’ professional conduct. He says HBS hopes this moral base will instill ethical, professional conduct, and he offers a unique perspective on how the School – a capital S, always, please – implicitly transmits good character through its structure, tradition and rituals, without specifically teaching morality. Though unusually interesting because of Anteby’s inside viewpoint and candid voice, this isn’t a casual read and the method sounds as if students also could use (and in practice, probably get) a stern talking-to about ethics now and then. *getAbstract* recommends this overview to anyone curious about the inner workings of this elite institution, to students trying to get in and to companies ready to use any reasonable tactic to teach moral conduct and add the foundational assumption of ethical practice to their intrinsic corporate culture.

Summary

Silence Is Golden

Harvard Business School (often referred to as just “the School”) attempts to establish a moral foundation implicitly by “vocal silence.” The theory holds that faculty and students will absorb the School’s cultural and ethical norms, through osmosis and gravitas, without the School naming or teaching specific values. The idea is that qualities such as “autonomy,” flexibility, “discretion” and creativity can flourish within this unstated but widely understood framework.

Campus Design

The School silently conveys orderliness through many of its physical traits. The 34-acre campus is isolated and subdued. The John W. Weeks Bridge, better known as “the footbridge” – a pedestrian-only structure that spans the Charles River – is one of the most popular ways to reach the campus. Once there, students enjoy immaculate grounds and well-maintained buildings. Instructors and students often walk the paths together. Landscapers are a constant presence, repairing the pavement and tending the grass, trees and shrubbery. Most of the flowers are white to contrast with the red brick buildings and white trim. Motor vehicles have limited access to the campus, and the roads are “strategically curved” to minimize any break in the scenic vista. This staging creates a homey, small-town feel though the School has “close to 2,000 full-time students.” Careful scheduling ensures that on-campus traffic moves in a familiar, orderly fashion.

“The communal life promoted at the School is one in which order prevails: Most individuals know what is expected of them and what they can expect from others.”

Neatness prevails inside the buildings. Professors’ offices are comfortably large. Each has a desk, a chair, a bookcase and a sofa. Custodians keep the windows clean and replace worn carpets. New professors find their

offices ready for occupancy within a day or two of their arrival, and students often help faculty members decorate their dens. The layout of the campus and the orchestrated activities inside the buildings purposely reinforce a specific mind-set and are designed to evoke expected conduct, as well.

“Division of Labor”

A highly structured division of labor tacitly defines faculty members’ experiences and contributes another aspect of the School’s culture. For example, only maintenance workers may hang objects on office walls. Instructors have assistants who handle administrative duties, like data entry and scheduling to free academics to concentrate on teaching. The assistants process the mail, organize student folders and may even deliver food to busy professors. Faculty support teams include research associates and course assistants. Off campus, a “concierge service” helps professors by arranging for housecleaning and repairs or by having flowers delivered for special occasions.

“Academic Relevance”

Harvard Business School professors, like their colleagues elsewhere, are promoted, renewed and tenured based on regular evaluations. However – unlike most universities, where performance is judged primarily on published work and peer recognition – the School mandates that professors generate “relevant scholarship.” Faculty members have numerous informal opportunities, such as luncheons and conferences, to “assess each other’s relevance.” This rigorous professorial evaluation goes a step further since the School also judges professors’ “managerial relevance,” that is, “research that helps advance business practices.”

“This book is...an inquiry into the organizational underpinning of moral pursuits.”

To ensure that each professor’s work is assessed based on its intrinsic merits rather than against any established criteria, the School has never vocalized or codified its definition of “relevance.” But it magnifies the importance of relevance by having instructors use their discretion to establish just what this criteria demands. As one senior faculty member put it, “Not defining it is what makes relevance relevant.”

“Physical layouts and their usage patterns provide critical clues to understanding social behaviors. They signal not only what behaviors actually occur but what behaviors are encouraged.”

Fellow faculty members assume that professors who join the School after executive careers in industry have already successfully dealt with critical managerial issues and are therefore automatically “relevant.” Demonstrating managerial relevance is a more daunting challenge for new faculty members with limited real-life experience. One option is to submit articles to the *Harvard Business Review*, though its editors regularly reject instructors’ content suggestions.

“At the broadest level, teaching at the School is a bit like a performance, one in which most moves and steps are rehearsed many times before class.”

Faculty members also can demonstrate relevance by contributing to written course materials, serving as consultants to prestigious outside organizations or sitting on boards of directors. Being interviewed or quoted as an “expert” by the outside media also demonstrates relevance.

Structured Flexibility

Though Harvard Business School encourages a certain degree of creativity within individual classrooms, professors follow a uniform approach to course preparation and instruction. Senior faculty members typically serve as course heads to ensure that all instructors teaching a particular course “are on the same page.” The School uses teaching plans from past years as case-study references. These teaching plans sometimes include detailed information, such as how long to play a video segment or what questions to ask students.

“Another idiosyncrasy of the School is the speed and professionalism with which offices are ‘turned around.’ The precision of the process reinforces the sense of order on campus.”

Although the faculty follows no official dress code, male instructors typically amass a collection of shirts, suits and ties in similar colors. Careful dress is a tacit reinforcement of a deliberate approach to building a dignified culture that expresses professional and ethical expectations.

“Academics tend to pay little attention to their attire, but most senior School faculty members have a clear sense of proper dress in the classroom.”

Teaching plans often offer notes about potential stumbling blocks that may interfere with the flow of a lesson and hamper discussion. Professors routinely pay a great heed to their classroom seating charts to afford each student equal opportunities to contribute to discussions. Participation accounts for roughly half of a student’s grade, so professors systematically ensure full class engagement by calling on students who haven’t spoken in a while. Color-coded printouts updated after each class indicate which students a teacher should call on during the next class.

“Teaching Performance”

Harvard Business School instructors see teaching as a “performance” of sorts, beginning with taking off their jackets before they begin. They must learn to pay attention to students who are speaking but also to maintain the lesson’s pace and convey its essential concepts. The curved design of the classrooms, which feature ascending rows of seats, traditionally fosters interplay among students. Instructors view themselves as guides, directing students toward self-realization. The School quietly discourages preachy monologues, regardless of a professor’s pedigree, and defines successful lessons as those that provoke stimulating discussions and arguments.

“Even though some students believe grades are somewhat randomly assigned, a pattern of lower grades across multiple courses is hard for students to fully discount.”

Most of the business-based case histories that instructors present portray realistic corporate situations to show the consequences of good and bad decisions. Students analyze companies' successes and failures and debate how corporate leaders might have avoided certain outcomes by taking alternative steps. Without stated intent, examining leadership decisions helps guide students toward making prudent, ethical decisions in their future corporate careers.

"Sometimes, an organizational perspective can be entirely discerned in an institution's approach to member entry and exit."

Instructors are solely responsible for grading their students, a task made more challenging by a mandatory grading curve that identifies the top 20% and the lowest 10% in a class. The School asks the weakest students to take a leave, typically for a year, to address their academic deficiencies. In a school where classmates spend a great deal of time together and form particularly strong relationships, the grading curve invariably creates competition among friends. Instructors understand that regulating the flow of the student population comes with the territory.

"The Big Room"

Assembling a talented faculty is critical to any academic institution. The School often hires the most qualified candidates from within, since their intimate understanding of its philosophy and expectations perpetuates its values. In 2009, roughly 30% of the faculty held an advanced degree from Harvard. Despite the positive aspects of "inbreeding," the School also has consistently tried over the years to bring in more outsiders.

"The School's insularity is reinforced by the river that separates it from the rest of Harvard."

Tenure is the ultimate unspoken "marker" of "proper socialization." The School's leaders expect instructors to earn promotions and they eventually ask teachers who don't advance to leave. Since relevance is heavily weighted in the evaluation process, nontenured instructors tend to experience more angst. After reading a detailed summary of each tenure candidate's qualifications and achievements, senior faculty members gather in the "Big Room" to vote on the promotion. Tenure is not automatic. "As at many elite educational settings, the notion of exclusion is integral to the creation of an elite status." For example, between 1998 and 2003, 85% of Harvard junior social science faculty members failed to achieve tenure.

The "Vocal-Silence Model"

Vocal silence as practiced at Harvard Business School may not guarantee the emergence of a moral code of conduct, but evidence suggests that it creates a favorable environment for such a development. "Despite the many organizational routines that can guide thought and action, ultimately a majority of members need to endorse and enact morals."

"Many processes at the School, including the steps required to prepare and teach courses, reminded me of a well-designed production line."

For example, following World War II, Germany and Israel tried to establish “organizational safeguards” to prevent their troops from blindly following orders that might result in soldiers committing war atrocities. The German military, without providing specific spoken definitions, expected its soldiers balance “claims of subordination” and “the demands of consciousness.” Israel promoted the idea that its service members should use “weapons and force” only in the context of their missions and should “maintain their humanity even during combat.”

“In vocal silence, an organizational member is left ‘alone’ to make decisions, yet also hears whispers of a more distant collective guidance.”

Corporate leaders are likely to resist using vocal silence as a viable way to address morals, since the world of business typically associates silence with negative outcomes. Nevertheless, deliberate silence can be transformative. For instance, in the pursuit of often-elusive answers to fundamental philosophical questions, silence can “create a nurturing void” in which “moral perspectives and viewpoints” can evolve.

“The sense of belonging to a complete, if not a total, institution is pervasive.”

The vocal-silence model that Harvard Business School uses has four characteristics that are applicable in other organizations:

1. **“The promotion of vocal silence is a gradual approach to attaining higher morals”** – Expecting individuals to alter their moral beliefs suddenly is unrealistic. Universities and organizations cannot forcibly dictate morality. Instead, they should provide the tools for individuals to live their values and show how business can be a “positive societal force.” Time and patience are paramount.
2. **“A model of vocal silence” relies on group members “to enact morals”** – An institution can effectively establish a moral policy only if the majority of its people support it. This is highly applicable in organizations that value tradition while embracing necessary innovation.
3. **“Minority members” may “feel more conflicted” in “vocal-silence organizations”** – And, these members may feel more assured in organizations that emphasize communication and “direct control.” Many employees find reassurance in rules and routines; they are reluctant to create waves or conflict. Vocal silence encourages free thinking and introspection. Firms that embrace vocal silence must seek to make everyone comfortable.
4. **“Organizations reliant on vocal silence to promote higher morals...seem immature”** – Companies that use silence to attain their goals – moral or otherwise – believe in the power of imagination, so they will always seem to be incomplete “works in progress.”

About the Author

Michel Anteby is an associate professor and the Marvin Bower fellow in the organizational behavior unit at Harvard Business School. He also wrote *Moral Gray Zones: Side Productions, Identity and Regulation in an Aeronautic Plant*.



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