

**ORGL610 MODULE 3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS**  
**CARING AND DOING:**  
**STRIVING TOWARD A WELL-LIVED ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE**

Amanda (Mandy) Kelly  
School of Leadership Studies, Gonzaga University

ORGL610: Communications Ethics

Dr. Kristine Hoover

March 5, 2023

## **Caring and Doing: Striving Toward a Well-Lived Organizational life**

### **Introduction**

As part of the exploration of communications and ethics within organizations during this class, I have been working through my own interpersonal dilemma surrounding transparency (or lack thereof) within corporate employee Talent Management procedures in my organization. In my Module Two critical analysis paper, I explored an ethical dilemma surrounding a specific situation I encountered last year. This dilemma involved career growth for a high-performing employee who reported to me. I encouraged this individual to join me in co-creating her own promotion document, which I would then present to our senior leadership for review and approval. I went against an informal organization preference (not a company-wide policy, as this process differs between teams), and faced reprimand as a result.

From the perspective of our executives, the development of performance-related documentation is meant to be kept private. Until that documentation is fully vetted, leadership and Human Resources maintain the material could be counter-productive for the individual in question. Believing, if the promotion was not successful, it could be demotivating for the employee, or open the company up to possible litigation. Their belief is, managers should work behind the scenes to either develop a high performer on a “Foward-Looking Slate” for promotion, or conversely, manage those needing improvement by creating an improvement plan and documenting their progress (or lack thereof). Either way, all of this is unbeknownst to the individual.

Empowerment and transparency are two values that lie at the core of my personal leadership philosophy. I believe everyone, regardless of their role, level, or tenure in a company, should feel empowered to actively participate in their own growth and development. Their leaders should be there to coach, guide, and provide feedback. In this paper I intend to explore

this transparent Talent Management dilemma in further depth from the perspectives of the mid-level manager (myself), organization senior leadership, and Human Resources.

### **Organizational Values, Mission, and Norms**

“Mission statements are meant to guide common understandings of what is valued in an organization but can be based on different ethical principles” (Hoover, Personal Communication, 2023). As I began the task of evaluating a particular ethical dilemma during this class, I proposed a set of “Leadership Principles” (Amazon, n.d.) were intended to be ethical signposts or reflections of ethical foundations. Some of those principles lay the core of my personal ethical dilemma, namely: 1) “*Hire and Develop the Best*: Leaders recognize exceptional talent, and willingly move them throughout the organization. Leaders develop leaders and take seriously their role in coaching others” (Amazon, n.d.), and 2) “*Strive to be Earth’s Best Employer*: Leaders ask themselves: Are my fellow employees growing? Are they empowered? Are they ready for what is next?” (Amazon, n.d.).

After more reflection, I realize ethical perspectives may differ depending on many factors, even though we all collectively understand an organization’s values. Amazon’s Leadership Principles are intended to provide this guidance and be a reminder of how corporate values should play out in all our day-to-day operations. In turn, this provides the foundation of legitimacy for both internal stakeholders and external customers. “Organizations create normative legitimacy in several ways: through economic viability, rational operation, operating norms, and through self-created norms” (Seeger, 1997, p. 105). The concept of legitimacy is important in the exploration of this ethical dilemma, specifically in relation to operating norms and the fair and equitable treatment of employees.

### **Power, Influence and Empowerment**

Johnson (2022) maintains that “The exercise of ethical influence is founded on an understanding of power, the capacity to control the behavior of others. Power is the foundation for influence” (p. 134). Within the five bases of power Johnson (2022) identifies, the senior level perspective, related to Talent Management, could be encompassed by Reward power. Reward power can be summarized as delivering something of value to others such as a promotion, bonus, or recognition (p. 134). Although I manage the team, senior level executives hold the power to deliver a promotion or bonus. From my own (mid-level manager) perspective, I recognize the importance of Referent power (Johnson, 2022). My personal style of leadership leans heavily on relationships that I have built with my team members and how I can best model behavior I wish to see in those I am helping to develop.

### **Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives**

“Empowered employees may expect to be treated equally, while managers view empowerment as a means for better getting the work done” (Johnson, 2022, p. 139). As a team leader and an employee, I see the development process as something deeply personal and unique to everyone. Individuals should feel empowered to take ownership over their own career paths. Ensuring the success of a team member (which includes providing help and guidance to those who are struggling) is a large part of my responsibility as a manager. I disagree wholeheartedly with keeping the process from the employee, “... because we have a tendency to live up to the expectations others place on us” (Johnson, 2022, p. 156). When we share those expectations and help employees be an author of that experience, in my opinion they will usually rise to the occasion. Senior leadership, in contrast, may counter this stance by taking a broader, less personal view of the development process and the empowerment of their employees. Executives are including measures of profitability and efficiency of the entire organization into their perspective. Though they may value performance and engaged employees as a whole, (as an

engaged workforce will be more likely to stay with the company), their interests lie in ensuring the success of the entire organization to deliver value for our end customers.

Human Resources, in this case, looks at development from a process, not a personal perspective. Their values surround consistency and equity in the execution of talent management initiatives to ensure fairness and legal compliance across the board. The communication of expectations (Johnson, 2022) may, from the HR perspective, be something which needs to be tightly controlled and monitored to ensure equitable application of talent management processes and policies. Both HR and senior leadership will be concerned with the company's reputation and public perception. Engaged employees who stay with the company will help to reflect stability, honesty, and fair practices. "An organization's reputation as a good, responsible, honest, responsive company is based on judgments about previous activities and outcomes. Similarly, an organization's reputation as dishonest, irresponsible, or inappropriate arises from judgement of its previous (past) activities" (Allen, 2005, p. 109).

### **Ethical Alternatives and Managing Conflict**

My personal values conflict with the organization's policy around Talent Management. "Aversion to conflict is counterproductive... conflicts can promote personal and relational growth" (Johnson, 2022 p. 169). Rather than avoid the potential conflict, I revisited the Amazon Leadership Principle of *Have Backbone, Disagree and Commit*, which states: "Leaders are obligated to respectfully challenge decisions when they disagree, even when doing so is uncomfortable or exhausting" (Amazon, n.d.). In this sense, functional and ethical conflict can be driven by collaborative methods which respectfully challenge the existing Talent Management process. These methods could include sharing the mutual gains that can be made from revising the existing policy, including employees who will feel more empowered, and leadership who

will have a more engaged workforce. I recognize it is I who am responsible for my own communication strategy (Johnson, 2022). By being both collaborative and cooperative in addressing this conflict, I have a better chance at reaching a desirable outcome for all parties.

### **Leadership Engagement and Organizational Culture**

Many of the questions I have been asking myself, considering this evaluation, are: How do we, as employees or mid-level managers, define an organization's identity? Does my definition of our culture differ significantly from our senior leadership? What role can I play in creating our culture, or changing the existing one? A critical element for any organization involves strong leadership commitment to defining, evolving, and nurturing a healthy organizational culture. Edgar Schein (Mike, 2014) maintains, "If you try to create a good culture, you better have a leadership that has that value and that concept and that set of rules and wants to do it. It is only going to be possible to get there if you have a very strong leader who says, 'This is how I really want to run the place'" (p. 322). Schein, using Southwest Airlines as an example, notes the company founder, Herb Kelleher, utilized a strategy which involved prioritizing people values, combined with an economic low-cost model. This strategy created alignment between leadership, HR, and employees, driving the positive culture Southwest has been known for.

In the case of my own ethical dilemma described in this paper, I see a need for transformation, but lack the support and engagement of leadership. Johnson (2022) maintains that "The greater the need for ethical transformation, the greater the need for engaged leaders" (Johnson, p. 302). As I look at the Leadership Principles Amazon was founded upon, I ponder: How are we ensuring that we, as a company, are living those values? Arnett et al. observes "A community of memory is both a collection of the past and an engagement with the future... A community of memory is not static; it undergoes necessary change" (Arnett et al., 2018, p. 141-

142). Considering this community of memory, I can attest my individual experiences do not align with the way the Leadership Principles are being applied. If we (collectively) are not living those values, what does the necessary change Arnett et al., refer to mean? Should we be adjusting the principles to reflect a change in values over time, or should we first be carefully examining our own behavior and compare to those historical values?

### **Conclusion: Finding Power in Personal Action**

Arnett et al. (2018) ask “What type of dwelling does a given organization want to be, claim to be, and function as?” (p. 132). In this dwelling place, the authors note how communicative practices define the type of home an organization invites us into. Much like different architectural styles, there is no “one size fits all” which fits everyone’s personal style for all time. “No dwelling place can please all, and no dwelling place can remain alive and well without change” (Arnett et al., 2018, p. 135). My current dwelling place includes a caring environment focusing on empowering individuals to achieve their best path to growth and fulfillment.

Exploring this ethical dilemma has aided my own critical reflection of the overall values and culture I have experienced in my working environment. I recognize my own conflict management style, which is normally collaborative in nature, was moving towards avoidance (Johnson, 2022). I was rapidly heading towards apathy, disengagement, and anger. Upon coming to terms with how my own organizational life experience did not agree with my own personal values, I recently took a terrifying, exciting, and bold step forward. After careful assessment, I made the decision to resign from the company last month and have accepted a role with a new organization which aligns with my values, goals, and aspirations. By taking this step, I have created a message I can control, and my actions have sent a message to the leadership of

my former company, one I hope will have an impact down the line. While interviewing for my new role I was careful to ensure the company's culture aligns with my values. This big step forward empowers me to move into a dwelling place where I can positively impact lasting change in an organization which is aligned with my personal values and beliefs.

## References

- Allen, A. L. (2005). Privacy isn't everything: Accountability as a personal and social good. In A. D. Moore, (Ed.), *Information ethics: Privacy, property, and power* (pp. 398-413). University of Washington Press.
- Amazon's Leadership Principles*. (n.d.). About Amazon.  
<https://www.aboutamazon.com/about-us/leadership-principles>
- Arnett, R. C., Fritz, J. M. H., & McManus, L. M. B. (2018). *Communication ethics literacy: Dialogue and difference*. Kendall Hunt.
- Johnson, C. E. (2022). *Organizational ethics: A practical approach* (5th ed.). SAGE Publication.
- Mike, B. (2014). Footprints in the sand: Edgar Schein. *Organizational Dynamics*, 43, 321-328.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2014.09.009>
- Seeger, M. W. (1997). *Communication and Organizational Legitimacy*. In *Ethics and organizational communication*. (pp. 103-115). Hampton Press.