

Syllabus
Unethical Decision Making in Organizations
(3 ECTS)

Author:

Guido Palazzo Professor of Business Ethics, Faculty of Business and Economics (HEC-Lausanne)

Ulrich Hoffrage, Professor of Decision Theory Faculty of Business and Economics (HEC-Lausanne)

Psychology Programme
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1. Course Description

a. Title of a Course: Unethical Decision Making in Organizations

b. Pre-requisites:

There are no prerequisites.

c. Course Type (compulsory, elective, optional): elective

d. Abstract:

This course 'Unethical decision making in organizations : A seminar on the dark side of the force' will teach you how strong organizational contexts push good people towards unethical decisions. You will also learn how to protect yourself and your organization against such forces lurking in the dark.

This course teaches how narrow frames and strong contexts can push good people towards unethical decisions and how they can protect themselves and their organization against ethical blindness. It draws from various disciplines such as management, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and literature, in order to learn what these disciplines contribute to a better understanding of unethical behavior. Whenever we hear about ethical scandals, we tend to believe that unethical or illegal behaviour in organizations is driven by character deficiencies of individual actors. Put differently, we simply assume that bad things are done by bad people. However, numerous corporate scandals have demonstrated that even people with a high level of integrity can break the rules if they are put into a strong context.

A better understanding of why and under what conditions good people make bad ethical decisions will enable us to better protect individuals as well as their respective organizations against the potentially overwhelming power of the context. It will also enable us to cure societies from problems like corruption.

2. Learning Objectives:

Learning objectives of the Unethical Decision Making in Organizations course is to provide students the basic tools to:

- empower the participants to analyze the risks of unethical or illegal behavior that might be triggered by powerful contexts.
- analyzes some of the most prominent organizational scandals of the recent decades through the lenses of these disciplines

3. Learning Outcomes:

At the end of the course, students are able to:

1. Explain the impact of social context on individual decision making using various theories (from Management, Sociology, Psychology, and Philosophy)

2. Apply these theories to the analysis of some of the most eminent organizational scandals of the recent decades
3. Assess risks of ethical blindness in your own organizational context
4. Design interventions to reduce such risks for yourself and your organization

4. Course Plan:

Week 1 – Ethical and unethical decision making

Have you ever asked yourself the following questions ? Why do human beings act in an illegal and unethical way? Why and under what conditions do we become evil? What motivates harm doing and what is the explanatory power of human nature and human culture? What is the evil anyway? And why is this relevant for us in our daily life? The first week will give you an introduction to the historic evolution of our modern understanding of evil, looking at how evil has been discussed in different times and cultural contexts. Furthermore, in this first week, we will discuss how you can deal with situation in which you have to make ethical decisions and how the theories of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant provide us a tool box for such situations.

Week 2 - Introduction to unethical decisions in organizations

We will first reflect upon the wisdom of a famous fairy tale in order to understand the power contexts have on individuals.

Subsequently, we will zoom into one of the most famous corporate scandals, the Ford Pinto case which demonstrates the power of context over decisions similar to the fairy tale. Finally, we will present our model of ethical blindness, which not only provides a conceptual framework to better understand these two cases, but also builds the backbone of the whole course.

Week 3 - The power of frames: How people construct their reality

In this third week we will examine how framing can contribute to unethical decision making. After having introduced you to the concept of framing in general, we will use it to interpret the Enron scandal. We will then discuss the recent Lehman Brothers collapse along one particular element of framing – the language we use in organizations. Building on this case, we will finally go deeper into the link between decision making and language and discuss how language influences what we can see and how we decide.

Week 4 - The power of routines

In this week, we will first look at how people and organizations (can) simplify information processing and decision making, namely by using heuristics and by establishing routines. Subsequently, we will examine key driving forces of ethical blindness in organizations and finally demonstrate the risk associated with powerful routines in a case study on innovations in a military context.

Week 5 - The power of strong situations

In this week, we will shift the focus to the environment of the decision maker and we will start by inspecting the immediate context. People are often in situations that have a strong influence on how they think and behave. Most of this influence comes from the presence of other people. The scientific discipline in which such effects are studied is social psychology and so we will look into some classic social psychology experiments.

Week 6 - The power of institutions

In this week, we will start by examining the impact of time on decision making. Subsequently, we will discuss the third contextual layer that we posit in our model of ethical blindness: the institutional context in which organizations are embedded. We will analyze this layer in more detail and discuss the impact of ideology on ethical blindness.

Week 7: The wind of change: how to fight ethical blindness

After having discussed for six weeks the forces that promote ethical blindness, we will now concentrate on defence strategies. This week, we will examine how we can fight against ethical blindness as individuals and as leaders in organizations.

5. Reading List:

a. Required:

Cropanzano, R., & Ambrose, M. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Justice in the Workplace*. : Oxford University Press. – URL: <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199981410.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199981410>– ЭБС: Oxford Handbooks Online

Hammack, P. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Psychology and Social Justice*. : Oxford University Press. – URL: <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199938735.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199938735>.– ЭБС: Oxford Handbooks Online

b. Optional:

Podsakoff, P., Mackenzie, S., & Podsakoff, N. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Citizenship Behavior*. : Oxford University Press. – URL: <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190219000.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190219000>.– ЭБС: Oxford Handbooks Online

Tropp, L. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict*. : Oxford University Press – URL: <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199747672.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199747672>.– ЭБС: Oxford Handbooks Online

In this course, information on recommended readings will be provided at the beginning of each module. At the end of each module, we will also give a list of additional resources to help further expand your knowledge on the topics discussed.

6. Grading System:

1. Multiple choice (Quizzes) : There is a total of 4 quiz for this course (during week 1, week 3, week 4 and week 7). Each quiz is comprised of approximately 7-9 questions. You don't need to read additional readings to complete it. You will be allowed two attempts for each quiz and there is no time limit to complete it. Please note there is a delay of 4 hours if you wish to make a second attempt to improve your score on the Week Quiz.

2. Dilemma assignment: You are expected to write an essay with min 220 and max 400 words .You may use any course content to write out your essay

3. Final assignment: the final exam is peer-graded assignment. We will ask you to write an essay with max. 1000 words. First, you prepare and submit your essay and then you evaluate the essay

of three other participants using grading criteria. You won't be able to view any peers' assignment prior to submitting your own work.

The grades will be given on a scale of 1 to 10 throughout the class. All grades, having a fractional part greater than 0.5, are rounded up.

7. Examination Type:

Questions for assessing the quality of knowledge:

Design and describe a defence strategy against ethical blindness, tailored to your own organization or any other context of your choice (your family, your religious community, or your overall decision-making routines of the past). The maximum word count allowed is 1000 words (without the references). References are optional but in case you would like to add, an extra section has been added below the "Evaluation/feedback on the above work" section.

8. Methods of Instruction:

Blended course: On-line lectures (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/unethical-decision-making>) and out-of-class work.

9. Special Equipment and Software Support (if required): PC, internet access