

Understanding the Rule-Following Behavior of Professional Managers at a Workplace: An Ethical Approach

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Abstract

The roles and corresponding obligations of professional managers at a workplace appear to be well-established and if at all a conflict in competing obligations arises, then the concerned manager is generally advised to consult and apply rules as they exist in the form of various laws, policies, and guidelines in the country, in the profession or in the industry, and in his organization. These three levels of rules are formulated in a complementary manner to help explain the working of an organization to managers and other people so that they may understand and arrive at judgments to appropriately act in the given fact situations.

However, the rule-following of managers, it is argued, ought to be ethically correct for their own sake and for the sake of an ethical environment in the organization. The managers, for this purpose, are required to rationally interpret the rules for their correct applications in fact-situations instead of just following the rules. They ought to look for a rational interpretation of rules in such a way that they do not compromise their managerial responsibilities as it is a question of understanding not only letters of rules but the spirit of rules. This managerial approach becomes possible, the argument continues, in understanding the nature and purpose of rational interpretation of rules because there are, for example, various other shades of interpretations possible such as blind or malicious obedience to rules, which apparently distort the rule-following of managers.

In view of the above, I argue in the paper that the rule-following of managers at a workplace is ethically required to be rooted in their rational interpretation of rules. I also suggest in the argument that a manager may understand the rational interpretation of rules from a philosophical perspective that is to say from a virtue-based approach. This implies that the cultivation of virtues enables him to interpret and apply the rules at a workplace in a rationally defensible manner.

Keywords

Professional Managers, Ethical conflicts in obligations, Rule-following at a Workplace, Interpretations of rules, Rational interpretation of rules, Virtue-based approach.

1. Introductory Remarks

The systematic nature of roles and corresponding obligations of professional managers at a workplace enables a conducive environment for managerial work to provide products or services to customers. And if a manager gets into a situation where he experiences a conflict in obligations, then he is generally advised to consult relevant rules which exist in the form of laws policies, and guidelines in the country, in the profession or industry, and in his own workplace. Indubitably, it is a good idea to follow rules but I wish to maintain that merely following rules at a workplace is not really helpful particularly when managers are ethically required to fulfill their managerial responsibilities. The point of contention is that they ought to rationally interpret the rules.

In view of this, I begin with a discussion of the roles and obligations of managers and go on to examine the issue of rule-following of managers with an emphasis on the complexity of the issue. I continue with the argument that managers need not to simply interpret the rules because there are chances that managers may interpret the rules in a morally incorrect way. The managers ought to rationally interpret the rules for the sake of fulfilling managerial responsibilities in a workplace, which means they ought to take into account not only the correct meaning and purpose of rules but also the context of a situation in the workplace.

2. Making Sense of Roles and Obligations of Professional Managers

It is well-known in the business world that professional managers receive intellectually dominant extensive training to provide service in a society and for this purpose, they acquire appropriate credentials of training from educational institutions. At a later stage; they become members of professional groups to protect and promote professional values relevant to their specific professions and alongside they increasingly learn to exercise a reasonable level of autonomy in their work-judgments. (Bayles, 2003, pp. 56-62)

This all gets reflected as they start working in different fields to provide products and services to customers. In this endeavor, they happen to play various roles of managers in a reasonably sized company as first-line managers, middle-line managers, and top-line managers, which like other roles in the society, embody certain obligations and “we cannot understand the role obligations of managers without knowing more about their specific role. (Boatright, Smith and Patra, 2018). A manager, for example, has an obligation to balance price and quality of the product on the one hand and paying fair wages to employees on the other. In this example, he is well expected to work efficiently and effectively. That is to say, he must thoughtfully use man, money, and machine in the making of a product to maximally attain the goals of his company that is largely concentrated in the creation of customer and earning of profits.

However, to begin with, such roles and obligations of managers may appear to be straightforward but on many occasions, managers do find it difficult to resolve the conflict between obligations. (Rowan and Zinaich, 2003, p. 2) A manager’s obligation to adjust the new recruit in the same room where three employees sit and work or to ask for a new room may create an issue of efficiency and effectiveness. Or else, a manager wanting to protect and promote the interests of customers may end up experiencing the conflict in obligations pertaining to compromising the financial interests of his employees in the company. These sorts of conflicting obligations occur in the working of a manager because, “Managers of corporations have obligations to their shareholders, but they have obligations to other stakeholders as well. In particular, they have obligations to consumers and the surrounding community as well as to their own employees. The purpose of the corporation, after all, is to serve public, both by way of providing desired and desirable products and services and by not harming the community and its citizens.” (Solomon, 2003, p. 361)

It doesn’t seem to be appropriate to critically and logically analyze such conflicting obligations in the given problem situations as and when the need arises because this process is time consuming and the manager is not generally able to invest the time required. One solution for a manager to make this process easy is to refer to ethical rules as they appear in varied sorts of formal rules. A manager gets to know about such formal rules as laws and policies of a country that govern his society; as rules of his profession and industry that control and guide his conduct in a

desirable direction; and as rules, policies and guidelines in his own company that inform him about relevance of his conduct in his own company. It goes without saying these formal rules get framed in such a way that rules of a profession and industry must be consistent with the rules of a country and the rules of a company must be consistent with rules of a country and the rules of profession and industry. (Ibid, pp. 2-3)

3. Developing a Perspective of Rule-following Behavior of Professional Managers

It seems professional managers have access to three levels of rules as indicated above, which is why they can follow rules to sort out any conflicting obligations as and when they arise in their workplace. However, on the surface, it looks simple that a manager has to follow the rules and that is the end of the matter but it is not so easy to act in an ethically correct manner. If a manager adopts a simple approach of just following rules, then that may not be helpful or even harmful in certain situations. There are rules in place but rules are to be interpreted for ethical correctness and equally important rules are to be examined whether rules themselves are ethical. (Kant, 2021; Mill, 1993)

A manager ought to cultivate the ability to rationally analyze the given problem-situations and for this purpose the applications of rules in the given problem-situations are to be correctly interpreted and judged to be ethical. Sometimes, a manager may be tempted to look for a solution to a problem-situation with reference to the relevant law of the country. Or else he may look for a solution in the common-sense judgment of co-workers in his company. In both the given options, he may be able to arrive at a solution but it remains uncertain whether the solution is ethically correct. The possibilities of doing something right or wrong remain. The reason being whether the law itself is ethical or whether the generality of law permits its correct application. And as far as, the common-sense judgment of co-workers is concerned, the judgement may or may not be compatible with the ethically correct application of rule in the problem-situation because common-sense judgement generally favors the interests of employees or employers in the garb of collective interests.

In continuation, we may note that the rule-following of managers also get moderated by certain factors: stage of moral development, individual characteristics, structural variables, organizational culture and issue intensity, which brings into focus the possible impact of one's ability to act morally free from external influences, his belief in himself, clarity and purpose in rules and policies of the company, risk tolerance and conflict tolerance to overcome unrealistic and undesirable expectations, the likely outcome of harm on the number of people. (Robbins and Coulter, 2002, pp. 141-144)

These observations do imply that the thinking and behavior of managers in problem-situations to apply rules is not a simple affair. (Hartman, 2003, pp. 1-3) It is a complex one that requires an active participation of managers as far as their abilities to think and behave in a logical and critical manner are concerned. They need to rationally interpret the rules in order to fulfill their managerial responsibilities. Because, more often than not there are chances that they move away from the need to rationally interpret the rules.

4. Understanding Rational Interpretation of Rules and Managerial Responsibilities

It makes sense to maintain thus far that a manager needs to follow rules in a given situation but simply following rules is not something desired for as far as managerial responsibilities are concerned. And more so because one of the essential meanings of responsibility is to live through values, which may or may not be possible if simply following rules appears to be the solution. The reason being, there are different possible interpretations of rules that a manager may opt for. It all depends upon his wit and training on the one hand and his intentions and willingness on the other. We may consider in this connection several possible interpretations of rules in obedience of rules that Davies notes in his paper: blind obedience, strict obedience, malicious obedience, negligent obedience, accidental obedience, stupid obedience and the last interpretative obedience, which is correct one for rational interpretation of rules. (2003, pp. 62-69)

Blind obedience of rules occurs when there is no concern for context or consequence. It is a mechanical response and the result may or may not be desirable. And strict obedience happens to take place as if there is a separation of judgement and performance and in following of rules the

performance comes into play whereas the judgement stays with higher authorities. There may be compensation for such a separation in the form of respect for authority in the company but then it doesn't seem to be a rational approach except in defence forces. If at all it is followed as a practice in a company, it gets reduced from following of rules to obeying of orders. (Ibid, pp. 63-64)

Working to rule or malicious obedience on the surface appears to be correct in application of rule but internally it is a planned strategy of a manager to work without goodwill that is generally available from the employee to the employer, to harass the senior manager or the employer. The goodwill of a manager helps him to use his common sense to interpret the general language of rules for the purposes of their applications in particular situations. But in case of malicious obedience of rules, the employee manager owing to his conscious misunderstanding interprets the rule literally or he goes a step further and looks for the most damaging interpretation of the rule that the language of the rule may permit in the given situation. (Ibid, pp. 65-66)

If unconscious failure to exercise reasonable care in the interpretation of rules is the basis of malicious obedience then unconscious failure or the failure to exercise due care define the other three possible interpretations of rules, namely negligent, accidental and stupid. Negligent obedience is a case of obedience as far as the subjective side of the manager is concerned but objectively it may not match with the ordinary practical intelligence of a manager. (Ibid) And if her judgment matches with that of objective judgment without really knowing or intending to do it, then it is a case of accidental obedience. "Unlike the negligent, the stupid fail because they do not know better." (Ibid, p. 67) The cause of not knowing may be lack of wit or training but it cannot always be offered as an excuse of not following the rules correctly. This point holds ground especially in case of professional managers. (Ibid.)

David rightly observes that except for blind obedience of rules, all other varieties of obedience that are pointed out thus far acknowledge some sort of interpretation and even in case of strict obedience the task to interpret occurs at the level of higher authorities. (Ibid, 67) He further maintains, "In malicious obedience interpretation is deliberately abused; in negligent or accidental obedience, interpretation is not given the attention it deserves; and, in stupid obedience, interpretation is done skillfully enough, whether from lack of wit or training." (Ibid)

We may infer from the above that a manager cannot assume managerial responsibilities on the pretext of maintaining that he is just following the rules or even he is interpreting the rules in the given situation to follow rules. He may fail to correctly interpret the rules for different reasons as we have noted above. And to emphasize, in the face of all these possible interpretations, the importance of rational interpretation appears to be an attractive option but not at all an easy option to choose particularly when this level of interpretation requires quite a few things on the part of the manager concerned.

In a rational interpretation, a manager is supposed to ensure that a rule in the given situation or the document fits in with other rules and the manager in his interpretation of the rule sticks to the same meaning of each term. There may still be a need to go outside the situation or the document to look for the intention of rule-making authority, the perspective of a rational well-informed manager, or even the perspective of a common man to arrive at a workable interpretation of the rule. Apart from all this theoretical exercise, a manager is well expected to understand the purpose and context of the rule, work-culture, and expectations of other managers in the company, consequences of certain mistakes in interpretation of rules to understand the critical importance of interpretation of rules. And keeping in view that rules are man-made, a manager can always aspire for review in the rules themselves or for that matter he can always be open to revision in his own interpretation of rule, if for example, new information comes in. This whole theoretical and practical exercise of interpretation of rules finally comes to the point of success of interpretation of rule when it results in workable courses of action. (Ibid, pp. 67-68)

I may contend on the basis of the above discussion that a manager is ethically required to rationally interpret the rules in order to follow the rules not only in letter but also in spirit. This may appear to be a metaphor but as we have noted the rational interpretation requires a great deal of manager's input to make sense of a rule in the given fact situation. He needs to cultivate virtues of competence and care to fulfill the above mentioned requirements of rational interpretation of rules. (Ibid, pp. 68-69)

5. Conclusion

The professional managers perform in their well-established roles and obligations at a workplace and if they experience any conflict in obligations, then they consult appropriate rule or rules in the given problem situation. However, as we have noted, simple following of rules most often do not result in fulfilling one's managerial responsibilities particularly in the ethically correct sense. This further implies that a manager ought to learn to interpret the rules and that too in the rationally appropriate manner given the fact that there are complexities in the problem situation at a workplace that he has to understand and address, which anyway is the best option for him to perform his role as an ethical manager at his workplace.

6. References

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