Panelists discuss business ethics

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business schools could instill a methodology to approach ethical problems. Business schools can instill at a very early point in one's professional training the notion of what constitutes ethical behavior, Pitt said.

But Toffler thought the most a business school could hope to do was to "help people to learn how to apply values in very complex situations." There is often no clear distinction between right and wrong, she argued.

Druyvesteyn shared Toffler's skepticism of courses on ethics: Ethics as a matter of conduct is not taught in the classroom, he said. "You can teach the nature and history of ethics as a branch of knowledge; you can teach the theories of obligation, rights and responsibility that have emerged from reflection on the subject." However, ethics as conduct is "not something you learn in textbooks; ethics as conduct is learned by observing the examples of others."

Different aspects of ethical behavior

Although all the speakers agreed that ethical behavior concerns the treatment of other people, each one stressed different aspects of ethical behavior. Thurow emphasized the individual's responsibility to the community. It is a question of how one balances and draws the line between responsibility to the community and self-interest, he said. "If you think about it, a hermit can be religious, but a hermit cannot be ethical."

"Ethics is a matter of individual conduct in everyday affairs... It involves real people putting their feelings of right and wrong into practice in their everyday relationships," Druyvesteyn said. The key word in ethics is fairness. "The primary stuff of business ethics is relationships among fellow employees," he said. Pitt took the pragmatic approach: breaking the law is "just plain bad business practice," Pitt conceded that the question of ethics remains if an action is legal. But if "it violates the law, we do not have to go to the question of whether it's unethical."

Toffler felt that the other panelists did not acknowledge the complexity of ethical problems. She challenged their assumption that ethical problems merely involve choosing between doing a right or a wrong.

"In the day-to-day kinds of problems that managers face, there are any number of problems that do not put us in the position of being able to figure out exactly what the right thing is to do," Toffler explained. "The world is very complex... In many situations, we are facing competing claims where we are pulled among many different stakeholders... or among many competing values."

The most important lesson business schools can teach, according to Toffler, is that as managers "you never have the choice to sit back and not act... you must make decisions and you must act even if you are faced with some fairly unpleasant choices. In business schools, you can be given those difficult problems and be helped to work through a solution in situations where you could never come up with the absolute right answer but where you... must act because not to act is an action in itself."

Fredrick Joseph, chief executive officer of Drexel Burnham Lambert (left) and Kent Druyvesteyn, head of ethics at General Dynamics (right) answer questions about business ethics during a forum held at the Sloan School last Tuesday.

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