

Ethics, Sustainability and Strategy: A Question of Balance in Human Resource Management Education¹

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Introduction

In the field of human resource management (HRM), the tensions between a consideration of ethical issues and the need to contribute to the bottom line have been apparent for some time. While HR managers in the past may have seen themselves as a kind of welfarist bridge between senior management and employees, the language and practice of contemporary human resource management paints a different picture—one of the HRM practitioner as a strategic business partner. It is in this realm of management practice that human resource management has tried to create a place for itself as a profession, "beyond personnel." However, instead of the socially responsible and independent practices typically associated with other professions, professionalism in HRM seems to have been recast in quite a different manner. In many cases it implies a focus on the financial goals of an organization (and its financiers), to the exclusion of any other stakeholder perspectives. The need to study the strategic aspects of human resource management from an ethically informed perspective is particularly salient when we consider the impact of corporate strategies like restructuring, downsizing, and outsourcing.

This paper focuses on the teaching of ethics to Human Resource Management (HRM) professionals. This is a worthy and important focus for individuals concerned with the "ethical side" of HRM. One of the principal challenges faced by those interested in teaching business ethics is legitimating ethical concerns within the dominant business orthodoxy. Ethics is,

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