

**CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION**

## **Multiple contexts and perspectives: ethics education in business**

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## **Multiple contexts and perspectives: ethics education in business**

**JNUSTA:** *(a) Ethics and the teaching of ethics are critical matters in the field of business. What approach do you adopt in infusing ethics into your students' undergraduate training in your school?*

**Audrey:** At the NUS Business School, the approach I have taken in my ethics-related modules (e.g., Business with a Social Conscience) can be characterised as follows:

1. The class starts with an acknowledgement that the way businesses are organised can have a profound impact on the behaviour of employees. A key question that I hope students will keep in mind is, “What behaviours are facilitated/hindered by organisational structures, cultures, and systems?” To use a simple example, how do commission-based rewards affect the behaviour of relationship managers in a bank?
2. Ethical problems are best approached from multiple perspectives, e.g., from psychology, sociology, strategy, management and philosophy. The module moves in phases across different types of business functions and processes such as product marketing, treatment of workers, social and environmental impact and so on.
3. A key feature of the module is that it points to the effects of social processes on the recognition of ethical issues and the choices that are made. Some questions that are addressed include, “Why are ethical issues recognised and acted upon in some situations and not others? Why do some organisations slowly ‘go rotten’, slowly drifting away from the ethical values that formed the bases of their cultures?” We also examine how the discomfort posed by ethical dilemmas can be neutralised by rationalisations, euphemisms, social norms and other factors.
4. The approach is context-based. We often use cases, but not just for analysis. Some cases illustrate interesting possibilities. For instance, one case

examines how a garment manufacturer created carbon-neutral lingerie. Other cases force students to confront fundamental questions. In one of my favourite classes, students read a case and conduct a trial of a leader gone astray. The classroom becomes a court of leadership. Some students serve as judges and the others form the defence and the prosecution. The trial forces students to address questions such as the extent to which integrity matters in judging a leader, what trade-offs they are willing to make for ethical lapses, and how much forgiveness there should be for leaders who have committed ethical violations.

**JNUSTA:** *(b) In your view, is ethics best “transmitted tacitly” or overtly taught “within a seminar on professional practice”? Jeffrey Chan thinks neither approach works well – what do you think?*

**Audrey:** The approach I feel most comfortable with is the one I have outlined above – ethics in the business context. Cases help to recreate the realistic and complex situations in which businesses and their employees work. From there, we discuss ethics in business. Ethics is a part of business and not apart from it.