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Huntsman Professor's Research Sparks Discussions About "Organizational Virtue"

By Steve Eaton



A presidential candidate in the last election cycle took flack when he said: "Corporations are people, my friend." And yet, a Huntsman professor is arguing that corporations can, in fact, behave just like people and his research is generating discussion in the academic management community.

When a strong organizational culture consistently demonstrates "virtuous" behavior, regardless of who comes into the company or leaves it, Brad Winn calls this "organizational virtuousness." His research put him front and center on a panel recently at the annual Academy of Management conference – the largest gathering of management faculty worldwide.

Dr. Winn, a management faculty member specializing in organizational leadership and strategy, maintains that if a leader thinks that a corporation is nothing more than the sum total of the integrity of each individual, then the strategy for change could be different than it would be if someone believed an organization could weave attributes like compassion into its very fabric.."

Dr. Winn proposed to three Academy of Management divisions that they consider doing a panel discussion on this topic at the conference in hopes that one of them would accept the idea. All three divisions liked the 10-page proposal so much, however, they suggested that the discussion be recognized as an "All-Academy Theme" presentation.

James Davis, the head of the Management Department at the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business, said that for Dr. Winn's proposal to become an All-Academy feature is an honor.

"When the work of one of our faculty members sparks the interests of professors from business schools across the nation, it's something we can be proud of," said Dr. Davis. "We are a school that emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership. Dr. Winn's research has shown that organizations that have high levels of integrity fare better in the marketplace and other people are taking notice of this."

Dr. Winn said that virtues like integrity, courage, justice, forgiveness, and compassion can be measured by asking employees survey questions about workplace practices. Based on those survey results, a score can quantify how an organization is doing.

"You can then look at different bottom-line measures such as profits, employee turnover, and customer satisfaction, and find out if organizations that score high for virtuousness also do well with the kind of things corporations routinely measure," Dr. Winn said. "Studies show that, in fact, they do."

When leaders see that correlation they want to find out how they can make their organizations more positive and virtuous, he said.

"There's a synergistic piece that the organization phenomena brings that can actually accelerate the virtues of individuals when they are in an organization together," Dr. Winn said. "I believe organizational virtue is a phenomenon that tends to exist regardless of the individual players who come and go and it sustains itself as a part of the organizational culture."

Dr. Winn said those on the panel were selected to represent a diversity of viewpoints, and that one professor even argued that most organizations are inherently evil. That kind of exchange is important to scholars as they seek to refine their research, Dr. Winn said.

Recently the *Journal of Business Ethics* accepted a paper Dr. Winn wrote with David S. Bright of Wright State University, and Jason Kanov of Western Washington University on organizational virtue.

"The *Journal of Business Ethics* is a leading management journal," Dr. Davis said. "To have research published there is to be considered an academic thought leader. Dr. Winn's research is having an impact."

Dr. Winn has done some of his research with Kim Cameron who is a cofounder of the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship at the University of Michigan and the author of the book "Positive Leadership: Strategies for Extraordinary Performance." Dr. Cameron visited the Huntsman School and facilitated a faculty retreat in August 2010.