



Bringing Character to Life: Virtues in Business and Finance

AIDAN THOMPSON
ANDREW MAILE

with
TINA RUSSELL



Background

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has sought to explore the place of character and virtues in professional education and practice through its 'Virtues in the Professions' research (2012–2020).

To date, more than 3,500 participants, across first year undergraduate students, graduates, and professionals with at least five years' of professional experience were engaged. The research considered the virtues important to teachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, and business professionals, and emphasised the moral character and virtues of a person over any ethical duties or rules that are prescribed by a regulatory body. Each profession was considered in its own right, as well as looking across the data for comparisons and contrasts between the professions.

The research that underpins this booklet is drawn from 824 business and finance students and professionals. The aim of

this booklet is to highlight the importance of developing professionals' abilities to authentically display and enact the virtues in the workplace that resonate with their personal life. In prioritising the moral development of professionals, employers can move away from the limiting focus on technical skills and expertise, which absolve the opportunity for personal flourishing and a professional commitment that serves the greater good of society. The application of the findings to the workplace will be enhanced

with a reflection from a leading authority in the field. It is hoped that professionals gain practical and actionable take-aways that will enrich their working lives by contributing to their professional purpose and sense of vocational flourishing.

'We all want to be more virtuous; this research demonstrates the priority that needs to be placed on supporting character development and virtue-based practice. For example, by comparing the personal character strengths in a self-selection exercise to the ideal character strengths. Surveying employees of your organisation to ask the same may reveal some surprising findings but will certainly provoke necessary discussion.'

The fundamental purpose of the people profession is to champion better work and working lives.

The CIPD's new Profession Map (<https://peopleprofession.cipd.org/profession-map>) details the knowledge and behaviours required to put values of being principles led, evidence based, and outcomes driven into practice. The new Profession Map is supported by a suite of free online courses for Members based on the behaviours in the Map that include Ethical Practice, Professional courage and influence; and Situational decision making.'

Tina Russell, CIPD



Character and Virtues in Business and Finance

A traditional conception of a 'good' professional includes requisite technical competencies for the field **and** excellences of character, required for sound ethical decision-making (Carr, 2018).

Character encompasses positive emotional, behavioural and cognitive habits that motivate and foster human excellence (Kristjánsson, 2015). Virtues reflect intrinsically and morally good qualities that help guide ethically sound decisions and actions; examples include honesty, modesty and kindness.

Research by the Jubilee Centre has found that the moral virtues have been neglected in workplace settings over recent years, yet there remains an inherent interest in reinvigorating these for personal and professional good, both by regulatory bodies and by pre- and in-service professionals themselves..

Honesty



Honesty emerged as the top-ranked moral virtue among experienced business professionals, in both a personal capacity as well as most-desirable 'ideal' for the profession. This positive finding correlated with interview data, suggesting that honesty also significantly contributed to a positive work environment (see Kristjánsson et al., 2017).

Honesty was the top ranked virtue across all five professions studied, suggesting that pre- and in-service professionals value both the opportunity to be honest and honesty of peers and colleagues in the workplace.

'The economic climate will force some tough decisions. From an organisational level, in an ever-busier world, we may feel pressured into taking short cuts. It is vital to prioritise consistent, open communications to staff and stakeholders and we should never underestimate the need to be fully transparent so as not to compromise the perception of honesty.' **Tina Russell, CIPD**

Individually, professionals should feel comfortable initiating difficult conversations when appropriate, and be open to receiving unexpected or surprising feedback from others in supporting honest working practices.

The importance of virtue in business



Business students cited financial aspiration as the top reason for choosing to study business courses. When financial remuneration and profit is central to one's motive for practice, the potential for unethical behaviours increases; making a focus on character in business even more imperative.

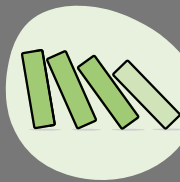


Where organisations promote positive cultures of character and virtuousness, so other outcomes are positively affected. These outcomes include higher performance levels among staff, greater sense of professional purpose, good citizenship, greater staff commitment and feelings of well-being.



Imbalances between character and professional judgement can cause professional blind spots that may result in misguided action and professional malpractice. Such incidents have been widely reported and can have far-reaching repercussions, such as the 2008 financial recession.

Barriers to virtue at work



Participants in the business and finance study revealed the highest likelihood of all professions studied to utilise consequence-based reasoning in response to workplace ethical dilemmas. Consequence-informed decision-making focusses on instrumental outcomes, such as increased profit margins and pacifying senior management ahead of more virtue-led choices of action.



Participants felt that the sector is over-regulated. A carrot and stick approach limits the possibilities for professionals to cultivate intrinsic motivation to abide by professional moral standards.



Rules and consequences do not empower the development of virtue-informed professional judgement. Rather, instrumental environments that endorse intense performance and financial pressures may 'corrode professionals' 'good' character.

Supporting organisational virtue



Empowerment and authenticity are assets to cultivate and nurture in the workplace. They enable individuals to express their personal character and virtues and require the purposeful fostering of individuals' character strengths.



Well-informed judgement requires 'good' character to be demonstrated and endorsed. The development of 'good' character leads to practical wisdom; this requires open-minded professionals who recognise diversity of circumstances and situations, and are thoughtful and decisive in their actions.

Employees thrive in cultures that celebrate the virtues

How does developing and embedding ethical codes of practice and organisational policies allow for positive virtuous organisational cultures?

'It is harder to take action following unacceptable behaviour in the workplace if expectations have not been codified; without doing so, the building and maintaining of trust will be compromised. Outlining principles of behaviour and the values of an organisation can create discussion points to establish how they look in practice, to reach a consensus and avoid virtues being cast aside as a personal value.'

The freedom to make mistakes creates innovation and prevents a blame culture. Such openness can lead to more collegial and collaborative working.

ethical dilemmas and to develop the confidence to challenge unethical practices.'

Tina Russell, CIPD

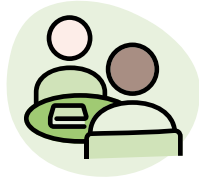
Employees thrive in working cultures that celebrate the virtues, make them visible and where they are experienced by professionals in practice. Individuals may need some coaching in order to recognise



Supporting professional virtue



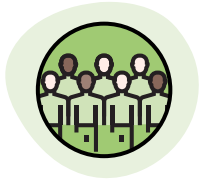
Emphasise and foster collaborations and collegiality. This often involves informal support such as mentoring, where junior colleagues can gain invaluable when senior colleagues act as role models and exemplars of professional virtue in the workplace.



Mentoring enables character to be taught and caught. In addition to setting an example, colleagues can share experiences of challenging ethical dilemmas they have faced, and considerations they weighed up in order to make a decision.



As professionals gain experience, their understanding of character strengths changes from competence-based skills, (e.g. multitasking and communication), to morally virtuous dispositions, such as honesty. Empowering professionals to contribute to virtuous professional cultures can overcome a focus on instrumental and performative practices.



The effects of an overly competitive working culture can be at the expense of virtuous professional practice. Opportunities to celebrate character-informed judgement of professionals should be taken as often as possible.



Change the narrative of career happiness and career success. Success is often viewed narrowly, and typically constitutive of material rewards. Yet ruthlessly abiding to a carrots and sticks work ethic may not bring happiness.

Can the business profession be virtuous?

Have professional virtues (such as honesty, fairness, and judgement) been eroded in the workplace?

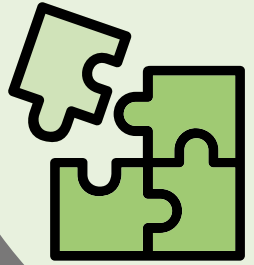
It is commonly accepted that prioritisation of the virtues has been eroded over time. Overly selective use of information and embellished stories are examples of how honesty and fairness can be exploited in the workplace. It is vital for good professional practice to not only demonstrate a perception that virtuous practice is welcomed, but also evidence that it is.

How can they be reclaimed?

- Be prepared to disrupt the status quo;
- Identify where your own personal virtues match the organisation's values;
- Empower colleagues to identify how they can authentically demonstrate virtuous practice;
- Evaluate and recognise performance through a character lens, rather than solely on financial or target-based metrics;
- Recruit individuals with genuine diversity, recruiting for skills and experience rather than specific education or qualifications;
- Challenge how organisational values are actually instilled in practice.

What are the most cited barriers standing in the way?

Businesses are often focussed on their bottom line rather than on people and culture legacy, especially where individuals are concerned with their own pursuits of promotion, pay and success. Where an organisational culture prioritises favouritism or nepotism, or where there is a perceived lack of accountability and of repercussions, so virtuous professional practice may be abandoned.



Final Comment

'Employers need to value their employees beyond income or targets. Giving more recognition to good ethical decision-making and judgement in the workplace can reap rewards beyond just monetary profit.'

Equipping all staff with a voice to feedback on organisational practices and culture is important, not just to avoid it being a tick box exercise.

Organisations that create safe spaces where open, two-way conversations can take place are often those places where virtuous professional practice is most evident.'



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Edgbaston, Birmingham,
B15 2TT, United Kingdom
www.birmingham.ac.uk

Designed and printed by

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

| **creativemedia**