

How to become a more mindful ethical practitioner

Organisations do not exist in a vacuum: they rely on and reflect the political, economic and social contexts within which they operate. Nela Smolović Jones discusses issues organisations need to consider today, from dealing with 'wicked problems' to gendered corruption, and offers her top tips for leaders to enable them to be mindful



THE GREAT WORK RESET

How to become a mindful ethical practitioner

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Transcription

Ethical practice means basically embracing an attitude that organisations do not exist in a vacuum but that they are part of a much broader social, political, technological and environmental fabric and not just economic. So this system within which we operate, within which organisations operate, that fosters this relentless drive to making profit at the expense of human beings or the expense of the environment, has caused a lot of damage and, in some cases, this damage seems to be irreparable.

So on the one hand we have climate change that is exemplified in this cascade of alarming environmental activity around the world, like wildfires in Siberia or

floods in the UK and Germany recently. We also seem to have lost a large proportion of Amazon rainforest, to name only a few. And then on the other hand, we have something like 40 million people trapped in the conditions of modern slavery and of course the increasing trend – and this is now happening in countries that we would normally consider wealthy countries, such as the UK and others – the trend of poverty in paid labour.

And all the things seem to affect women disproportionately to men. So it is important to address these issues, to be mindful of these problems as someone who is leading an organisation or someone who is working in one.

Why does ethical practice matter more now?

One reason that these kind of problems and issues matter now more than maybe in the past is because large global events, such as continuous financial crises, pandemics – first Ebola, now COVID – and the climate crisis, they're becoming more prominent so it's very hard to ignore them. It's becoming much harder to ignore them because people are losing their livelihoods. We're seeing massive labour layoffs; we're seeing a series of bankrupt companies and so on.

But another perhaps more positive reason is that organisations and their leaders are seemingly becoming more proactive at preventing and ameliorating some of these issues and challenging what we call 'wicked problems' – those problems for which there are no easy solutions – and recognising the value of broader input in their decision-making, such as that of a diverse workforce for instance.

Who is a good example of an ethical organisation?

So the organisation that springs to mind is the TRAIID organisation based here in the UK. It is an organisation that started small and yet it had a very, you know, big ambition and that is to challenge the fast fashion industry and to make the world a greener space. And it's quite successful in doing that. And there is also a group of organisations known under the banner of B Corp. So these are organisations that are trying to redefine success in business and to build a more inclusive and sustainable economy.

Different organisations can approach these issues differently. And they can be very creative at doing that. So recently I read how the National Trust has introduced siestas for their staff because the climate is becoming hotter in the UK. So we are seeing how organisations are adjusting to these new contexts while drawing on practices from elsewhere.

And for one, I'm looking forward to seeing other organisations and their leaders follow such a wonderful example. So I don't know if you're going to have siestas in our workplace but, you know, fingers crossed.

How can leaders become more ethical in their practice?

So internally leaders should be paying more attention to the demographic of their workforce, what they're bringing to the organisation and ultimately what an organisation could do to draw on such potential.

But to accomplish this, I suppose, leaders need to be first and foremost mindful of any biases that may inform the management decisions and, you know, practice in general – so for example gender biases – and explore the conditions in their organisations that may keep some women squeezed in this metaphorical glass sandwich. So where women are unable to progress to senior positions while simultaneously being set up to fail.

Leaders may also proactively develop initiatives aimed at attaining greater equality in the workplace. And they could do that in an informed and meaningful way. So, for example, they may create policies and practices that are conducive to human life and support staff through their life events. And this is what I mean by saying that organisations don't exist in a vacuum. So leaders need to pay attention to issues such as menopause, miscarriages, abortions, parenthood, sex reassignment to name only a few, because I think ignoring these may not only affect the morale in the organisation but the productivity workers as well.

And my wonderful colleague, Jo Brewis, has recently drew attention to the fact that women reaching menopause represent the fastest growing group of workers in the UK labour force. And this is a significant number of workers to neglect. But of course, on the other hand, there is always resistance to equality initiatives, and this is a completely different beast to tackle. So initiatives aimed at attaining greater equality are not resisted always deliberately or out of malicious reason, but because of the deeply entrenched prejudice that people are often not aware of. And this is why it is important to tease these out and challenge them.

How can organisations tackle inequality and discrimination?

And as we said before one of the most efficient ways to do that is to immerse yourself in a diverse environment because when difference meets difference they become obvious and visible. And I guess on the other hand it is also because there is a confusion about what equality means in practice.

So the argument that is often put forward against implementing positive action, which is a voluntaristic or positive discrimination which is embedded in our policies, is that it is somehow unfair and what organisations should be adhering to is meritocracy. Yet, what such arguments lack is taking into account all those structural inequalities that exist outside the boundaries of an organisation.

So when we employ someone, for example, to be fair in our practice we need to think about these kinds of inequalities. So we need to ask questions like who is likely to have access to good education that could recommend them to an employer or who can afford to spend a year or sometimes more in an unpaid internship in prestigious companies that could also recommend them for a better position.

So in fact we are asking who has stronger chances to succeed and why? And the research tells us that it is largely marginalised groups, such as women or ethnic minority and black women, that encounter such barriers. And one way to course correct is to employ positive discrimination or positive action. And I should say that there are tons of business cases made out there to prove how equality is profitable. But I think, not that I have evidence for it, but my gut tells me that there are more and more organisations that are beginning to embrace equality not because it is profitable but because it's an ethical thing to do.

So there are organisations who are finding their place in this wider fabric that I mentioned at the beginning of this interview and that want to make a difference, that want to make the world a better place, not only for organisations but for workers, for themselves. But of course there is also on the other hand something called gendered corruption that works against all these kinds of positive initiatives.

What is gendered corruption?

Gendered corruption is essentially an abuse of power aimed at benefiting one gender at the expense of another. And this should not be confused with gender bias because unlike gender bias, which can be unintentional or subconscious, gendered corruption is a deliberate intentional practice aimed at securing more power and more wealth for one gender – usually men – at the expense of women using things such as sexism and patriarchy as a tool.

So I suppose here it is important to draw attention to the fact that organisations are porous and that patriarchal norms will continue to seep into organisational practice infecting that practice. So it will affect how decisions are made, in

whose favour, how laws and policies are interpreted, and essentially how wealth and power are distributed. And in my work I theorise gaslighting as one form of such gendered corruption and different tactics that perpetrators use to discredit and eliminate that targets from spaces where important decisions are made, where power is negotiated and assumed and so on.

What are your top tips for leaders to enable them to be mindful?

So one of the effective ways in which organisational leaders can be mindful is by immersing themselves in a diverse environment. So employing people coming from different contexts because these people can bring different knowledge and different expertise and just by doing their normal everyday practice, they will surface potential biases.

Another one would be to make informed initiatives. So to avoid tokenism speak to researchers, hire people who really understand the issues that you want to tackle in your initiatives aiming to improve equality. So, for instance, it is probably unethical to hire men to write initiatives about women, women's gender equality, only, or to hire white people to design an initiative aimed at attaining diversity and equality between different ethnic groups. Right. It's just being mindful of different people's experiences and different people's expertise as well.

And the final bit is something to do with gender corruption. So being mindful that these norms, gender norms, that they are embed deeply embedded in all kinds of everyday practices, be it in family or in society and how we treat one another. So we bring all of these into organisations. So I guess organisations could become potentially these emancipatory tools for fighting and deflecting gendered corruption on a daily basis if they want to.

[Nela Smolović Jones](#) is a lecturer in organisation studies at the Open University's Department for People and Organisations and founder and director of the research cluster Gendered Organisational Practice, which sits within the [Research into Employment, Empowerment and Futures \(REEF\)](#) academic centre of excellence in The Open University Business School. Her research focuses on the interface between gender and democratic practice, especially areas such as feminist solidarity building, democratic organising, equality at the workplace and institutional forms of gendered corruption. Nela has co-authored a microcredential for Open University/FutureLearn on [Business Management: Improving Organisational Practice](#). This interview is part of the [Great Work Reset](#)

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