Does being religious or spiritual make you more ethical at work?

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India's multifaith society is a perfect example of how various beliefs are integrated into work ethics. Credit: Ben Dalton/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Can religion and spirituality promote ethical behaviour in the workplace?It's a [contentious issue](link), but [our research](link) comprising interviews with forty Indian top level executives suggests it might.

We found that virtues embedded within the various traditions of religion and spirituality (Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism) play a role in ethical decision-making in the workplace.

Thirty three executives explained that these traditions promoted virtues such as integrity, flexibility, moral excellence, tolerance and responsibility. An executive in the automobiles sector reflected on the virtue of flexibility:

"…our Islamic religion teaches us to not shut the door on others' viewpoints. I employ this philosophy or value or whatever you want to call it in my job. I listen to my teammates. We work out our differences of opinion and come to some acceptable middle ground at all times trying to value our core beliefs."

Some executives even felt it was better to resign from their position when faced with an ethical dilemma.

They attributed this to the embedded ethical virtues in their religious and spiritual convictions while making this tough decision. An executive from the IT sector mentioned he had left his previous organisation because his religious background conflicted with the organisation's continuous copyright violations. He stuck by his integrity:

"I could not sleep at night for several nights and approached my Zoroastrian religious advisor who advised me to seek employment elsewhere. I left the firm for the current firm and feel I dodged a bullet."

However, seven executives who did not subscribe to a religious or

spiritual group suggested that non-religious based virtues with a focus on humanistic ethics and professional pragmatism should be encouraged.

India is a multi-faith society, so it was suggested that such a view would help workers remain neutral. An executive from the media sector suggested workplaces should encourage non-religious and non-spiritual individuals to rely on their own humanistic belief system:

"Ethics have to be practised at a human level. Once we open it up to religious interpretation, there is scope for endless debate and confusion. Ethics to me is a secular topic. You need to be sensitive and weigh the consequences of business actions to set a code of ethical practices. Religion can provide some kind of model, but to me it is a hindrance."

In religious-based spirituality, certain inspirations from one or more religious traditions may be drawn upon as a means to an end.

In non-religious spirituality there is normally an absence of religious belief. Instead, such spirituality is based on secular or humanistic values, such as interconnectedness with others at work or in a society and serving a higher purpose in life without necessarily referring to God or a Creator.

Recent studies have linked religiosity and spirituality to corporate social responsibility, altruistic behavior; and pro-social and ethical behaviors.

Other studies have challenged these conclusions however, with evidence of contradictory findings. Some have argued that religiosity and religious-based spirituality could promote unethical behaviour. For example, discriminating against another person who does not share one's belief system. It might even flow into hiring practices and how one treats another colleague at work.

Nurturing ethical decisions

Our paper published in May 2017 isolated the role of religiosity in the development of ethical virtues in India. These virtues included empathy, justice, temperance, transparency, conscientiousness, wisdom and moral fortitude.

The virtues translate into competencies that help foster ethical actions. For example, empathy relates to the variety of ways to connect with employees and foster quality working relationships. Actions include "nurturing a particular individual", "building friendly relations" and "not using seniority to get subordinates to do something unethical".

Moreover, temperance focuses on personal integrity and and assists in "avoiding contact with someone of dubious character" and "not wavering from one's ethical principles".

Conscientiousness embodies the ability to behave ethically in the face of temptation. An executive in the engineering sector stated that when his peer advised him to manipulate the price of products to include unreasonable markups, he refused to do so and advised:

"With my customers I will always try not to cheat them. I will see to it that they will get good quality."

Ethical dilemmas and paradoxes

Despite the rich tapestry of religions and spiritualities, unethical behaviours such as corruption, bribery, cronyism and nepotism appear to be rampant in India.

One conclusion might be that certain individuals rationalise their

unethical behaviours as a result of external pressure to conform. Such pressure coupled with personal greed arguably override any intention to remain ethical.

Ongoing education in the form of seminars, workshops, training and case studies related to ethical virtues is important. For example, an executive with a consultancy service business explained:

"Our company has got workshops which we attend regularly and we read lot of books and journals. We come across a lot of practice related issues and what all things are happening in the world. That's how we try to update ourselves and try to have a positive mindset towards ethical practices."

These initiatives consequently promote ethical decision making in the workplace when the religious bases for those virtues are removed.

Several Indian multinational firms do business in multiple overseas countries and ethical standards and expectations may vary across countries and cultures.

An executive from the IT sector suggested emotional intelligence could be useful for those faced with an ethical dilemma in a cross-cultural context. That includes being aware, being in tune with others and having the foresight of how one's actions affect others. Indeed emotional intelligence could provide the clarity needed to discern whether the decision is ethical or not. It is also a skill that is sorely needed for leadership development.

Demonstrable consistency in ethical decision-making and leading by example are necessary to ensure ethics are reinforced. An inconsistent decision-making style with a high regard for ethics by leadership one day and disregard the next only conveys that compromises are acceptable.

Globalisation and the movement of labour are rendering workplaces in both developed (Australia, Singapore) and developing (Brazil, Malaysia) economies diverse. In such multi-faith workplaces, having an ethical approach that is inclusive and relying on the core virtues embedded in religiosity, spirituality and humanity might provide consistency in ethical decision-making.

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