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Watts Teaches about Social Responsibility and Leadership

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“When I was an undergraduate, I kept flip-flopping back and forth between being a business major and being a psychology major. Then I took a class on giving people psychological assessments to help them identify what their strengths are and what careers they might be a good fit for. It was in that class that I first heard of industrial/organizational psychology.” This is how Dr. Logan Watts explains how he chose to become a psychologist.

A native of Georgetown, Texas, he obtained his doctorate in industrial/organizational psychology from the University of Oklahoma, and today he is an assistant professor of psychology in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

Watts wrote his doctoral dissertation on the issue of creativity and leadership. In the process of his research he mentions that, “I gave students a hypothetical scenario where there is a 3,000-employee furniture company that is failing due to declining performance. Students are invited to participate as fictional consultants to come up with some solutions for the problem. Ultimately, what we found was that, when people were asked to generate highly creative ideas in an environment that was seen as collaborative and supportive, they tended to produce the most creative solutions.”

The pressing question is to what extent is it important for organizational leaders to be truly creative? “Creativity is critical to how an organization performs over time. Organizations can’t survive without innovation. But this doesn’t mean that innovation is for everyone. Not every individual is cut out for truly creative work. Creativity is a very demanding process. It is very time-consuming, it requires effort, it requires resources and lots of investment,” says he.

Watts has also worked in the area of social responsibility, and one wonders whether there is a conflict between that and the increasing emphasis on a company’s bottom line. Watts mentions that, “I think senior managers as a group are beginning to become more aware of the value of ethics and social responsibility. This is particularly the case with the largest organizations, because the largest



Dr. Watts at his office.

Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

organizations have the most to lose from being unethical.”

Another interesting question is to what extent corporate CEOs in this country are different from those in Europe, where they seem to develop a greater sense of social responsibility. “I think that part of it is this legal mindset that we have gotten ourselves into. There is this fear among CEOs that if they say ‘I’m sorry,’ they’re admitting their guilt, and then they’re legally responsible for correcting the situation. So, their lawyers tell them, ‘No, no, you can’t say that and that.’ As we as a nation develop a culture that supports social responsibility as a pivotal value, I’m hoping we’ll see less of that.”

Over the years Watts has been involved in ethics training worldwide. One wonders how the issue of plagiarism can be addressed when the word means different things in different places. “One of the best solutions is to educate early and often on the topic. We have ethics training programs in place in the

CUNY system. One issue is that often these ethical training classes are delivered online, and students know they can usually click-through the program really quickly and answer a brief quiz at the end to show that they were paying attention. If they don’t do well on the quiz, they can retake it. Just the way the training is administered and evaluated communicates how serious the institution is about education on those topics.”

Based on his research and experience, Watts has come up with what he calls “The Golden Rules of Ethics Education,” which he explains as follows, “One of my colleagues and good friends wrote that article a couple of years ago based on the findings from an ethics education grant that we executed at the University of Oklahoma. What we did was we reviewed the literature of over 300 ethics studies. These were studies that most of the time were educational initiatives to try to get people to improve on knowledge, skills, or something related

to ethics. We looked across all those studies, and we tried to find what characteristics were representative of the best training efforts in that group of studies.”

Some of the findings of this research were surprising. “What we discovered was that programs that try to use too many different delivery methods actually can hurt the value of the effort. We found that it is good to use between two and four different methods, and by delivery methods I mean lecturing, showing videos, doing class activities, doing team activities—things like that. It’s possible to have too many activities, but it’s also possible to have too few activities. There is kind of a sweet-spot right in the middle,” says Watts in regards to teaching ethics to students.

But that was not all. “Another thing we learned is that the same rule didn’t apply when it came to content. There are different content areas. An example might be compliance or environmental issues or diversity issues. In general, what we found was that having more content areas was associated with a more effective training program, which is a little bit different from the delivery methods finding.”

Of course, some people may say that your ethical values are just the result of how you were brought up. “Leaders who are exposed to very negative experiences early in life and don’t respond to those experiences well are the ones who tend to have more issues with accountability in a power role later in life. It depends on whether the leader interprets those events as formative or not in his or her life—whether they are interpreted as redemptive, for example, or as a cause of bitterness. There is some evidence that how people interpret those events has an influence on their beliefs and consequently on how they lead others later in life.”

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