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Ethical and Responsible Conduct in Professional Life

Maxims for a Society with a Future

Industrial and technological achievements make it possible to accomplish almost anything imaginable—in a positive as well as a negative sense. We've reached a point at which we can do sustainable damage to the environment and the entire world in so many different ways. Meanwhile, we've created all too few instruments to restore the nature that's been despoiled.

An ominous demographic development has long been rearing its head. Social changes combined with medical breakthroughs have led to enormous structural transformations and to steady global population growth accompanied by constantly rising life expectancy. Does Planet Earth make enough resources available to accommodate this growth? Conventional energy sources such as fossil fuels are limited, and generating energy on a sustainable basis conflicts with the business model prevailing in this economy. The medium-term consequences are indisputable, but the private sector pays scant attention to factors beyond short-term profit goals. All of the effects that can now be projected for the timeframe beginning three years from now are quickly relegated to the domain of speculation and utopian musings. So just how are necessary steps to be implemented or made mandatory under these circumstances?

On our way to complete digitization of all information, we now have at our disposal the possibility of obtaining information in real time about events transpiring in public and private spheres all over the world. But do we also take action when we become aware of a deplorable state of affairs, or is it rather the case that, as a result of the easy availability of information, we're overcome by a creeping case of *laissez-faire*?

Technologies permit anyone to save, access, process and evaluate the world's exponentially growing databases and accumulated personal profile information. This flood of data is being fed by more and more detailed and specialized knowledge from a growing number of narrowly-focused fields of expertise. How are we supposed to get an overview here? Complexity management and a transdisciplinary effort to bring together diverse skills in order to deal with this workload don't often come up on people's educational and training agendas. "Shareholder value" cannot be the sole magnitude that guides a company's strategic decisions. The interrelationship of the profit motive and the common good necessitates rethinking of the social role a company plays: limitless growth versus qualified growth. Is everything feasible permissible, and who bears responsibility for what happens?

Obviously, this economic crisis is also a crisis of corporate cultures! What's lacking is a prudent yet decisive way of dealing with values and the readiness to assume responsibility, with risks

and opportunities. But what we lack above all is a vision of how to get from short-term market advantages and processes to sustainable development and the solution to longer-term challenges. All too often, ethics and cultural values are understood as costly impediments to progress that are strictly a drag on a bottom line seen from a short-sighted perspective.

An ethics discourse could play a very important part in a process of more precisely defining the roles of human beings, personnel and enterprises at the nexus of social and economic forces. In this connection, those who bear responsibility now as well as those who will do so in the future can mediate holistic aids to orientation and the ability to act in a turbulent, high-pressure environment.

But ethics has to pay. And it can, which is by no means a novel insight. Although the internal contradiction of this assertion is virtually impossible to resolve, the complicated concept of economic ethics holds within it a major opportunity for the economy to once again flourish within and together with society.

On the other hand, current discussions about education and educational policymaking are characterized by increasingly short-term economic interests and, simultaneously, the overvaluation of specialized technical knowledge. Tunnel vision of this sort is certainly not conducive to bringing about an open, creative-constructive attitude that would be able to meet the challenges of sustainable development.

Of course, recent college grads know how to work with computer programs but many of them have a hard time organizing themselves, particularly when it comes to asserting themselves with non-streamlined qualities.

So then, what can be said about how people in our society come to terms with values and their readiness to accept responsibility? What sort of latitude is accorded to innovations and new ideas in today's economy? What kind of progress do we need? And above all: what form of occupational responsibility are we accepting as individuals?

The Amina Foundation has been working in pursuit of this ethical mission for two years now—testing and staging projects and discourses on German college campuses with representatives and mentors from the business world, academia and many segments of society. After all, now more than ever, transdisciplinary dialog and experience with other cultures are prerequisites for productive, inspiring ways of life, lifestyles and careers that are good for society and the environment.

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald.

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