

"DEATH OF A SALESMAN AS AN ETHICAL PRIMER' REVISITED"

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an undergraduate sales class assignment using Death of a Salesman in identifying/discussing ethical issues. It lists the ethical issues identified by the students and discusses the sales-related issues mentioned most frequently. It also addresses a few ethical issues in the play not identified by students.

INTRODUCTION

In 1986, Caywood and Laczniak examined the use of Arthur Miller's 1949 play, Death of a Salesman, as "a provocative launching point for understanding ethical issues in the context of sales management" (p. 81). They identified ten issues which they felt were "core ethical elements raised in the play" (p. 82).

While the work of Caywood and Laczniak is interesting, thought provoking, and very valuable, it also appears to be somewhat esoteric and "creative". Some of the identified dialogue does not appear, to this author, to lead readily to the discussion and propositions put forth.

This paper will address the use of Death of a Salesman as an aid in discussing ethics and ethical issues in a sales/sales management class from a more simplified perspective. Because many of the ethical situations run throughout the play and cannot be condensed into a single scene or incident, no one section of dialogue can truly exhibit the depth of the issues.

Therefore, no attempt will be made to identify specific passages or situations for each issue, as Caywood and Laczniak did, though some examples from the play will be used. Instead, this paper will address the ethical issues which appear in the play in a more generic fashion.

This paper is not intended to criticize or minimize the work of Caywood and Laczniak, nor does it attempt to present statistical support and significance for any findings. Rather, it is a subjective analysis intended to do two things: 1) provide a description of a class project which this instructor found to be stimulating and interesting, and well received by the students; and 2) discuss the relative value of using this particular piece of literature, Death of a Salesman in identifying and discussing ethical issues in a sales setting.

The next section of this paper will briefly discuss the use of fiction as a surrogate for life. Following this, the class project which provides the background information in this paper will be described. The next section will identify and discuss those ethical issues which were identified most frequently by the students and which can be related directly to personal selling and sales management.

Following this, additional ethical issues not identified by the students but believed by the author to be present in the play are identified. While this is not intended to be a complete listing of these issues, it is relatively comprehensive, based on the opinion of the author and the issues identified

by the sales class. The paper will conclude with a general discussion of the use of Death of a Salesman as an "ethical primer" and a summary and conclusions section.

USING FICTION AS A SURROGATE FOR LIFE

Some may argue that using fiction is not an appropriate method for identifying and teaching "real world" issues. While fiction may or may not reflect reality, using fiction is a commonly accepted practice. As Zorn (1991) states, "Granted that fiction is not reality, the best fiction--particularly the best performed fiction--can provide valuable insights into the nature of communication." (p. 219). Kopald (1992) agrees. She says that "... some learning is therapeutic, particularly expression of strong feelings which are evoked when students recognize themselves or their situations in literature." (p. 57). Thus, using a play such as Death of a Salesman is a legitimate teaching technique.

CLASS ASSIGNMENT

This work is based in part on the results of an undergraduate personal selling class assignment and in part on the author's thoughts, beliefs, and interpretations of the play. The personal selling class consisted of twenty-two students. Personal selling is an upper division marketing elective, taken by second semester juniors or senior marketing majors and minors. Most of the students either worked at the time or had worked in the past. Many had limited sales experience, frequently in part-time retail positions. All were traditional students.

The assignment was simply to read Death of a Salesman and write a paper identifying and discussing the ethical issues raised in the play. Students were initially told that there were a minimum of six to eight issues which had been identified previously, but if they saw fewer they were not to "force" issues they did not feel were there. (It appears that some students did this anyway, which was not unexpected.) They were also free to identify more than the six to eight issues if they saw more.

Students were not told that the idea for the assignment came from a previously published work. It did not appear, from the papers, that any of the students were aware of the existence of Caywood and Lacznik's article. None of the students identified the issues in the manner that Caywood and Lacznik did and none cited the same or similar passages.

This written assignment was supplemented by a class discussion of the play and the ethical issues raised on the day the papers were turned in. In an effort to provide a more informal atmosphere for the discussion, the class doubled as a pizza party. The Vice President for Academic Affairs attended at the invitation of the instructor and was an active participant in the discussion. This interaction between students and administration, and the informal nature of the setting, created a wonderful atmosphere and experience.

This discussion went beyond simply identifying ethical issues. The instructor served as the moderator of the discussion, but his input into the discussion was minimal. Rather, the instructor's role was to keep the discussion flowing in the desired direction (there could be many directions, depending on the desires of the instructor) and avoid getting caught up for too long on any one issue.

One of the methods used in this class was to examine each of the key characters in the play (Willy, Linda, Happy and Biff (Willy's sons), and Howard (Willy's boss)). Ethical issues involving each of these characters were discussed, as well as the impact each character had on Willy and his ultimate demise. Side discussions also focused on the impact Willy had on the direction of the other characters, especially his sons.

ETHICAL ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY THE STUDENTS

Table 1 shows all of the ethical issues identified by the students in their papers and the number of students identifying each issue. It was somewhat surprising (and disappointing) to note that none of the issues, including the most obvious issues of stealing, lying, cheating, and adultery were identified by all 22 students. The issues are presented in the order of frequency of mention by the students.

Obviously, not all issues identified were related directly to sales in the play. Students were not asked, intentionally, to identify only those issues which dealt with sales, although that is certainly a possible restriction which could be considered by the instructor. However, this assignment was more concerned with looking at a "real world" situation and identifying issues with ethical implications than with restricting such awareness to sales issues. While some students attempted to tie these issues to sales in their discussion, others did not.

Some might argue that not restricting the assignment to sales issues lessens the value of the assignment. However, the author does not agree. In fact, that may be a strength of using Death of a Salesman.

Encouraging students to think about and identify ethical issues in any context is a valuable experience. Using Death of a Salesman forces students to look at a descriptive study of the hypothetical life of a tragic individual and identify where in this life ethical issues arose. This makes the assignment more realistic than simply lecturing about ethics or using cases which are written with specific ethical issues in mind.

In conducting the class discussion, the focus was drawn to those issues directly impacting sales. This paper will also focus only on those ethical issues which can be readily related to the sales profession. Some of the issues which have similar causes, solutions, and impact on sales and sales management have been combined.

Stealing

All but one student identified stealing as an ethical issue in the play. While Willy (the salesperson) did not steal from his company, he did condone stealing through his encouragement of his sons to steal.

In fact, he was almost proud of his sons for the "courage" they showed. He pointed to this in discussing the theft of some lumber when he said "I gave them hell, understand. But I got a couple of fearless characters there." Willy was also guilty of rationalizing the thefts of building materials and athletic equipment by his sons.

Theft can be a common problem among salespeople, as it is with many employees. Many

salespeople, especially those who may be disgruntled with their companies, steal merchandise, money, or supplies. They then rationalize the theft with the attitude that the company has not provided them with all the rewards that they deserve, so they are simply taking what should be theirs anyway.

A discussion of employee theft provides the opportunity to point out just how serious this problem has become for businesses today. It is estimated that as many as 30% of employees have stolen from their employer (Kinni 1992) and the estimates of U.S. businesses' loss from employee theft range from \$40 to \$50 billion a year (U.S. Commerce Department estimates) (Delaney 1993; Kinni 1992) to \$120 billion a year (Buss 1993).

In fact, it is estimated that employee theft is responsible for 20% of the business failures annually in the U.S. (Delaney 1993) and 30% of the small business failures in Canada (Holt 1993).

This problem directly impacts the bottom line profit of a firm. Therefore, reduction of the amount of theft by salespeople (or other employees) will immediately increase a company's profitability.

Lying/Cheating

While most of the lying and cheating which takes place in Death of a Salesman does not occur in sales situations, lying to customers and cheating them in one way or another are two of the most frequent and serious criticisms of salespeople.

Many customers feel that a salesperson will tell them whatever they want to hear in an effort to make a sale and will take any short cut available in delivering what has been promised. Unfortunately, many times this has been the case.

With the increased attention being paid to "relationship selling," however, lying and cheating are becoming less common. Salespeople must continue to work on gaining the trust of the customer by telling them "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" and delivering on what they say they will do. Telling the customer something that is not true, even if it is unintentional on the part of the salesperson, is one of the quickest ways, if not the quickest way, to lose the trust of the customer.

A salesperson is better advised to promise less and deliver more, rather than to promise more and deliver less. Few customers complain when service exceeds expectations. Instead, most will brag to their colleagues and friends when they do receive more than promised. They feel they have received "something for nothing", which is something we all enjoy doing.

Wrongful Termination/Loyalty

One of the biggest (and most pleasant) surprises of this assignment was that over half of the class identified the "wrongful termination" of Willy Loman as one of the ethical issues in the play. These students felt that the company owed Willy something in return for the 34 years he had put in with the company.

This is encouraging for two reasons. First, it shows that the students still place value in the loyalty that Willy has shown to his company throughout his career. This is somewhat surprising, given the belief among many (including the author, to some extent) that today's young people are "rootless and pessimistic" and "self-centered and directionless" (Taylor 1991). However, studies done in recent years show that today's younger generation cares more about society as a whole than did the preceding generation (Tetzeli 1991; USA Today 1992).

Secondly, it shows that students do recognize that the company has ethical obligations to their employees just as the employee has ethical obligations to their firm. The concept of loyalty is changing for both employers and employees (Solomon and Gunsch 1992). This is becoming more of an issue as companies go through "downsizing". Employees who feel they are in danger of being let go at any time do not develop loyalty to their companies. Rather, they are more concerned with improving their flexibility and marketability so they have other opportunities in the event that they are terminated by their employer (Moravec 1994; The Economist 1993). Because of this, many people feel that company loyalty is declining among the work force, in general (Moskal 1993).

Howard (Willy's boss) had numerous alternatives to terminating Willy. While it is true that Willy is no longer (if he ever was) one of the more productive salespeople in the field, his product knowledge and experience could still prove valuable in an inside sales position. It is also possible that he could have handled a smaller territory closer to home. Lower expectations as to the number of calls required and less travel might have helped Willy continue to be productive. Many of these alternatives, as well as some others, were identified by students in their papers.

Bribery

Another issue encountered frequently by salespeople is the issue of gift giving/bribery. In the play, Happy talks of taking money from manufacturers to "throw an order their way". Salespeople are often accused of offering gifts/bribes to influence the buying behavior of the customer.

There is a fine line between giving a gift in gratitude for past business and offering a bribe in order to influence future behavior. It is estimated that \$3.5 billion was spent on business gifts in 1990 (O'Neill 1991). Although there are governmental guidelines as to what constitutes a bribe (only gifts costing \$25 or less can be deducted as a business expense), a salesperson should be provided with clear guidelines by his/her company as to what is allowable and what is not. Companies should also have clear policies on the acceptance of gifts by their employees (Patterson 1992).

Some believe that any gift, regardless of value, constitutes a bribe and should not be allowed. This could eliminate the (legal) giving of gifts entirely. Most gifts, even those given in thanks for past business, are likely to (and sometimes expected to) influence the customer to continue doing business with the firm and the salesperson. In fact, many companies have adopted policies which do not allow for the acceptance of gifts (Patterson 1992). This avoids having to make distinctions based on value or intent.

Womanizing/Adultery (also alcoholism and drug addiction)

In *Death of a Salesman*, both womanizing (Happy, especially, and Biff to a lesser degree) and adultery (Willy) are present. Although alcoholism and drug abuse are not apparent in the play, they occur frequently in salespeople for the same reasons as womanizing and adultery: excessive time away from home.

Any salesperson who travels ends up with some time to "kill" while on the road, especially in the evenings. Many end up in bars, both in the hotel/motel where they are staying or in the social centers of the town they are in. This can lead to womanizing/adultery, and, when it takes place over a prolonged period of time, can lead to alcoholism.

These problems can lead to problems in the personal life of a salesperson, which can then influence their job performance. Recognizing the potential for these problems can help to reduce and/or eliminate them.

Time management can play a major role in reducing the amount of time spent away from home. Proper scheduling and routing of business trips can reduce the number of nights spent in hotels.

Attempting to make evening calls (dinner or evening appointments) can reduce the amount of "free" time a salesperson has and also reduce the number of calls which must be made during the day. Making more frequent, but shorter (two or three day trips rather than a full week), sales trips can also help reduce this problem.

Doing paperwork in the evening can also reduce the amount of free time for the salesperson. This can be encouraged through training and can be facilitated through the use of portable computers. This can turn this "free" time into productive time and reduce the number of days which must be spent traveling.

ETHICAL ISSUES NOT IDENTIFIED BY STUDENTS

While the students identified numerous ethical issues (some of which were questionable as to whether or not they were truly ethical issues or not), there were other issues which the author of this paper sees as being present which were not raised by the students. These include alcohol/drug abuse (discussed above), inadequate training of Willy by the company, and dishonesty. These will each be discussed briefly.

Inadequate Training

An issue related to the wrongful termination of Willy is the lack of adequate training. While this issue was not identified by students, it is still an issue firms face in dealing with salespeople. This issue was discussed in class, and students readily made suggestions and recommendations when the issue was raised.

One apparent problem Willy experiences is a lack of training. His time management is not good, his selling skills appear to have slipped, and perhaps most importantly, his view of what is valued by customers, his firm, and society as a whole seem to have taken on a warped perspective. His view of success is "to be well liked". He feels this is the only way to be successful.

Training could have helped to overcome many of Willy's problems. Time and territory management could have been improved to avoid some of the problems he experienced. Interaction with other salespeople from his firm and refresher training could have helped keep his selling techniques current. Perhaps most importantly, he might have seen that "being well liked" was not the key to success.

No longer is it an acceptable practice to put young, inexperienced salespeople in the field to learn through trial and error. Formal training is a necessity in an increasingly competitive world. Likewise, experienced salespeople also need periodic "refresher" training. This keeps them current on new products and uses and helps keep their selling skills sharp.

Dishonesty

Dishonesty, as referred to here, is in the form of failing to tell someone the truth. Willy is a victim of dishonesty throughout the play. He is constantly shielded from the truth by those around him, especially Linda (his wife). "His family, particularly Hap and Linda, attempt to legitimate Willy's view of himself in various roles, even when they do not seem to believe what they are saying." (Zorn 1991, p. 221). This reflects Wilmot's (1987) perception of "reflected appraisal", the idea that our self-concept is shaped in part by others' messages of how they view us.

While this deception occurs to keep from hurting Willy, in the long run it leads to his downfall. This shielding lets Willy perpetuate the belief that he can still be productive and that he is still a good salesperson. Unfortunately, deep down, Willy knows this is not true. This is the conflict that eventually leads to his demise.

The unwillingness or inability to address problems as they arise leads to bigger problems at a later time. The problems continue to magnify and the solutions become more difficult to implement. This is a problem which is experienced in all areas of life, both personal and business.

It is not uncommon to hear a sales manager talk about an unproductive salesperson whom he doesn't have the heart to fire because they are such a nice person. Instead, they let them continue in the position and struggle. The salesperson is probably not happy, the company is losing business, and the customers are not receiving the attention and service they deserve. Who is the beneficiary of this perpetuation? Only the sales manager, because he/she does not have to confront the salesperson.

When poor productivity is present, it should be addressed immediately. One of two courses of action are viable. First, if the problem can be overcome through training or by making some other adjustments, this course should be pursued. If, however, it is a problem which cannot be corrected, then it is in the best interest of all parties to terminate the relationship as quickly as possible. In this way, everyone can move forward and search for a better situation.

DISCUSSION

Death of a Salesman provides a rich resource for the identification and discussion of ethics and ethical issues in sales classes. It allows students an opportunity to examine a "real world" setting

and look at the actions as an impartial observer. It also allows them to see the consequences of the behaviors.

Numerous approaches can be taken to using Death of a Salesman. The instructor can assign written papers identifying the ethical issues (as was done in this class), the student can be cast into one of the parts in the play (Willy and Howard (his boss) are the most obvious) and asked to identify potential actions/solutions (Kopald 1992), group discussions can be conducted addressing any or all of the ethical issues found in the play (as was done here), or parts of the play can even be acted out with the characters reacting as they would react if they were in the situation.

The movie version of the play could also be used, either in lieu of the written play or as a supplement to it. In almost any of these situations, students become active participants and gain a deeper understanding of the problems encountered.

Likewise, other books, plays, or movies can also be used in a similar manner. Movies such as Used Cars, Wall Street, Tin Man, and Dead Poet's Society have all been used successfully by colleagues. Books such as The Goal, The Greatest Salesman in the World, and The Quadrant Solution can serve similar purposes. The use of "nontraditional" teaching methods such as these add diversity to the classroom experience. It also, hopefully, shows students that there are lessons to be learned from many experiences, not just those that occur in the classroom.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper is not intended to serve as the definitive work concerning the use of Death of a Salesman as an example of ethical situations facing salespeople today. Rather, it is intended to provide some simple, clear-cut ideas as a starting point to the study of ethical issues in sales and alternative methods of generating class interest and discussion. Hopefully, it will spark an idea in the mind of the reader as to a way that they can use Death of a Salesman (or some other play, book, or movie) in their classes to improve the study of ethics and other issues.

One must remember that Death of a Salesman was written in 1949, an era in which selling was very different than it is today. Some of the issues identified as ethical questions by both the students and the author today would not have been considered ethical issues at that time.

Changes in technology and travel have also created major changes in the sales field. Air travel was in its infancy and computers were not available. Automobiles were slower and roads and highways were not as predominant or as good as they are today. Because of this, more salespeople spent more time on the road than they do in today's society.

Communication techniques have also improved dramatically from 1949 until today. The improvements in and increased use of the telephone, improved mail service, and the advent of fax machines have allowed for much faster, superior quality, information exchange. This has reduced the reliance on face-to-face interaction between salespeople and their customers. The increasing growth and use of the "information superhighway" using computer networking will only continue and even intensify this trend.

Despite all of these changes and improvements, Death of a Salesman still provides a viable

means of identifying and discussing ethical issues facing salespeople. While much has changed, much has remained the same. Many of the issues present in Willy Loman's life remain issues to be encountered and wrestled with by today's salespeople. For this reason, Death of a Salesman remains a viable and valuable resource in identifying and addressing ethical issues in sales.

Epilogue: It has occurred to the author (and many others, I'm sure) that it would be very interesting for someone to rewrite Death of a Salesman to the setting of the 1990s. Much of the play could remain the same, but the changes experienced in society and technology could be incorporated. This would, perhaps, make "Death of a Salesman: 1995" an even more outstanding ethical primer for salespeople and sales managers.

TABLE 1
Ethical Issues as Identified by Students

Personal Selling class (22 students)

By Frequency

Stealing	21
Lying	18
Adultery	17
Suicide	13
Wrongful Termination	12
Cheating	9
Bribery	8
Womanizing (Happy)	6
Favoritism	4
Disrespect	3
Child rearing	2
Greed	2
Anger	
Career Choice	
Character	
Cheating on co-workers	
Desertion (by Willy's Father)	
Get rich quick attitude	
Hypocrisy	
Influence	
Insurance fraud	
Power of money	
Prostitution	
Role of women	

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