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From awareness to solution: Building blocks for business ethics decision-making

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Abstract

It is evident that the economic meltdown has raised questions on how ethical business decisions are, and whether values are evident in all business activities. Together with the questioning of the morality of markets, many people are also questioning the way business is done in a market-driven society. From the literature it is evident that there is a growing concern about the impact the market has on people's lives. At the same time, there is an emerging tendency to question society in general's market orientation and level of materialism. In view of these observations, the paper argues that the individual has as much responsibility for ethical decision-making in business as organisations have. In addition it promotes the perspective that business decisions are taken not only in formal business, but that non-business entities and entrepreneurs should also be guided on how to make value-informed business decisions. The emerging research question is therefore to identify how the individual inside and outside the formal organisation should deal with his/her ethical responsibilities in diverse business decisions and activities. This research question is examined from a qualitative research perspective to provide user-oriented knowledge. Five building blocks for ethical decision-making are identified. These building blocks are individual responsibility, sphere of influence, stakeholders, sustainability, and ethics as relationship.

Opsomming

Van bewusmaking tot oplossing: Boustene vir sake etiek in individuele en korporatiewe besluitneming

Die ekonomiese verlangsaming het vrae opgeroep oor hoe eties is sakebesluite en of waardes in besigheidsaktiwiteite teruggevind kan word. Naas vrae oor die moraliteit van die markte, gaan vrae ook op oor hoe besigheid in 'n markgedrewe samelewing gedoen word. Die literatuur oor die onderwerp bevestig dat daar groeiende kommer is oor die impak wat markte op mense het. Vrae word ook gevra oor die samelewing se fokus op die mark en groeiende materialisme.

Teen die agtergrond van hierdie opmerkings argumenteer die skywer dat die individu het net soveel verantwoordelikheid in sakebesluite as maatskappye. Omdat nie alle besluite in die formele sakesektor geneem word nie, word die standpunt bevorder dat entrepreneurs en kleinbesighede begelei moet word om waardegedrewe besluite te neem. Voortspruitend hieruit is die navorsingsvraag hoe die individu binne en buite die formele sakesektor met sy/haar etiese verantwoordelikhede moet omgaan. Die navorsingsvraag word deur 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetode beantwoord om gebruikersvriendelike kennis te skep. Vyf boustene word geïdentifiseer vir etiese besluitmening: individuele verantwoordelikheid, invloedsfeer, belanghebbendes, volhoubaarheid en etiek as verhouding.

Keywords:

business ethics, responsibility, sphere of influence, stakeholders, sustainability, ethics as relationship.

1. Introduction

The *economic meltdown* challenges the principles of a free market economy, uncontrolled expenditure, job security and capitalism, hence the way in which we think about the economy and the market and the way in which we do business. Not only has this new way of thinking about the economy had a marked impact on how we view wealth but it has also influenced how we view the gaining of profit. Here, too, are we confronted with what is important to people. If a sustainable society was at all important, would we have exploited the economy or even manipulated market figures for personal gain (for example the well-known Enron saga in 2001) especially at the expense of the powerless and vulnerable (taking into account the high levels of unemployment and poverty)? If fellow humans were important to us, would we have exploited them in the name of a free market economy? Or would we have enslaved them under communism and taken away their sense of enterprise? The same can be said with regard to the handing out of social grants rather than the promotion of sustained jobs and work security.

Not to be forgotten is the growing questioning of the markets' morality as mirrored through economic exploitation and personal lifestyle. If the market were value-driven, would we have ended up in such an unequal world? Sandel (2012a, 2012b) argues convincingly that the market has influenced all spheres of human activity (for example care, education, government, art, sport, family life and personal relations). The alarming fact is not that the market share is growing but that the market is influencing those human spaces that should not have been linked to economic forces at all. As a result, everything is influenced by the market and its impact on our lives. The concern with this development is the absence of equality amongst citizens and the growing corruption in public and private life. Sandel (2012a:16) correctly points out that the issue is not with a *market economy but a market society*. The market economy is an instrument to leverage economic growth. A market society on the other hand, overshadows all aspects of human existence. The irony is that the market is still regarded as basis for societal well-being.

This does not mean that the market influence is generally accepted. For example the growing philosophy of *slow living* questions materialism, wellness, pleasure, values – in essence the ethics of how we live (see Parkins & Craig, 2006; Honore, 2004). This is aligned with Sandel's (2012a, 2012b) view that the ethical boundaries of the market should be well accounted for.

The following two comments can be made from these observations:
- Global economic challenges such as the economic meltdown, job losses and poverty leave many communities vulnerable. This calls for a value-driven market approach to secure sustained livelihoods.
- Not all people are comfortable with a lifestyle based on materialism. This call for a personal ethics leading to a value-based and value-driven lifestyle.

The emerging question is, where does it leave us with regard to the way in which we are doing business or participating in the economy? From those who have been affected negatively by (global) economic developments there is a demand for economic justice. The same demand exists from those who question a materialistic lifestyle although for a different reason. Both groups appeal for a value-driven way of doing business. Sandel (2012a:125-128) offers a valuable contribution to this discussion by arguing that the more we *practise* values in our economic activities, the more *fit* these activities will be to address societal needs. The *training* metaphor further suggests that values are not a consumable but more like a muscle that is becoming fit the more you train (use) it.

Fort and Schipani (2004) opened the debate more than a decade ago with their appealing argument that business and corporations can secure sustainable peace. Corporations have the opportunity to show integrity and to bring people of diverse backgrounds together. Through the way in which business is performed peace can be elevated to achieve sustainability. They commented:

> Business organizations provide a place where individuals can develop face-to-face relationships with others. They can form a sense of community with those whom they previously did not know. This kind of learning-by-doing has roots in other kinds of peace-related projects (Fort & Schipani, 2004:72).

The conclusion is evident: Looking more attentively at the challenges will confirm the existence of mechanisms to deal with value-driven business (this is not a new development), while at the same time it will report on the shortcomings of these approaches (business ethics in general do not have enough impact). This conclusion hints at the effectiveness of current business ethics thinking. Are we placing the value emphasis on the right challenges and is our approach to business ethics appropriate? Is our focus more on decision-making or does it include consumer behaviour and protection of the environment? In short, what is the scope of our business practices?

2. Looking more attentively to South African challenges

The various "# campaigns" in South Africa over the last two years has reopened the debate on value-driven business, business decisions and public expenditure. Most notably in this debate are events such as the "#Fees must fall" campaign at universities, the Constitutional Court's decision on Nkandla, the media reports on the alleged tension between the Minister of Finance and the Hawks, the rise of "tenderpreneurs" (misuse of tenders to gain access to vast amounts of public money), state capture, the inability of government to deliver (quality) services and the xenophobic attacks on foreign businesses.

These activities (and more) open the debate on how ethical and value-informed (public and private) business activities really are. Media reports on corruption suggests that "dirty hands" are eating into our hard earned economy. At the same time a sense of social justice is emerging. Rossouw (2016) comments that participation in a public challenge (such as in the controversy around the tension between the Finance Minister and the Hawks) illustrates the concerns citizens have about the economy and hence about the well-being of society. Public participation addresses the concern raised by Sandel (2012a:16-18) that the public's participation in debates around the market and its morality are very often either absent or not critical enough.

Another feature of business ethics models and frameworks is the strong focus on the organisation and not enough on the individual outside the context of the organisation. This observation presents the idea that ethical responsibility in business is something that does not go beyond the context of the organisation. Turning to existing frameworks and models for business ethics, it is evident that these frameworks and models are primarily associated with *pure* business or economic activities and that not enough attention is paid to the role business ethics should play in private life or activities not normally associated with economic or business activities. The importance of this is well articulated by Sandel (2012a:14) who comments that the reluctance to engage in moral and spiritual argument has drained public discourse of moral and civic energy. This has contributed to the technocratic and managerial politics that worries societies today.

Typical thinking on business activities is often limited to the macro economy. The purpose of the abovementioned frameworks and models is to promote value-driven business, to support accountability and transparency in business activities, and to promote integrity in business activities. If this is the case, then why are there so many negative comments (examples above)? The question immediately arises as to whether the mere existence of business ethics models and frameworks is enough to secure fair business in society.

Digging deeper into this issue, a notable shortcoming in these frameworks and models may be perceived that many business decisions are taken outside the formal economy. Typical examples from social institutions outside the formal economy may be higher education (think of third stream income and endowments), the church (as non-profit organisations focusing on service delivery) and healthcare (representative of a major percentage

of governments' annual budgets). Alongside such social institutions, public and private activities such as research (mainly through government-sponsored grants), will and estate management (inheritance), and art and crafts markets (entrepreneurship) can be identified. Typical business ethics frameworks and models do not have institutions and activities such as these in mind, regardless of their importance (see Sandel, 2012a; 2012b; Verstraeten & Liedekerke, 2010). This is of particular importance in an "experience" economy where people can very easily fall into the trap of impulsivity and emotional experience (Piët, 2003:2-4). The pleasure culture or economy, too, creates the idea that pleasure is the ultimate experience (De Wachter, 2013:124-128) without asking about the ethical consequences of our decisions and conduct of business.

On an individual level, that is the private life of an individual, business decisions and activities are very often excluded from business ethics thinking. The role of individual / personal ethical decision making in business is very often overlooked if not ignored.

Based on the evidence provided the following observations can be presented:

- Existing business ethics frameworks and models do not sufficiently cover a diversity of business activities or the individual's role therein.
- The mere existence of business ethics frameworks and models is not sufficient, and people should be sensitised as to how to deal with individual (private life) and organisational (collective) business challenges.

This paper will present building blocks for a business ethics framework that can address the identified shortcomings outlined above. These building block will further assist to conceptualise the meaning of business ethics.

3. Research question, aim and objective

The comments in the foregoing paragraphs allude to the need to present a framework for business ethics that can be used beyond formal organisational and business activities only. In addition the concern is raised that people often view their ethical responsibility in the context of the public sphere only, and do not understand their individual role in business activities.

The emerging *research question* is therefore to identify how the individual, both inside and outside the formal organisation, should deal with his/her ethical responsibilities in diverse business decisions and activities. Understanding the role of the individual alongside that of the corporation in business activities will serve as the research question of this paper. The identification of the research question fits with Macnee's (2004:212) view on research questions, namely that they should address a gap in our knowledge basis.

The *objective* of the research is to identify building blocks for a business ethics framework where the individual has as much responsibility for fair trade and business as the organisation.

The *aim* of this paper is to present building blocks that can be used by the individual as a framework for business ethics decision-making.

The *outcome* of the paper is the evidence that awareness creation in business ethics is not enough, and that solutions to challenges should be presented.

4. Research design and methodological consideration

Research can be grouped into three different categories: conceptual and theoretical research; empirical or fieldwork research and policy research. This paper focuses on conceptual or theoretical research. The methodology analyses those activities that will have an impact on business decisions and to present a framework for dealing with business ethics.

The research for this paper departs from a literature review approach. The research methodology applied in this paper concurs with Mouton's (1996:29, 119, 120, 121, 171, 172) viewpoint that the emphasis is rather on the *interpretation of the information* than merely the *sharing of information*.

The literature review is part of a qualitative approach to the conceptual understanding of business ethics. In the qualitative approach three activities take place:

- The line of argument is identified.
- Patterns of similarities and differences are outlined.
- The existing knowledge basis is extended.

In addition to the conceptual and theoretical approach of this paper the research wants to add the concept of "user-oriented knowledge" as an outcome of the research. User-friendly knowledge presupposes engagement with stakeholders and the way in which stakeholders can benefit from the research (Johnson & Cooper, 2014:97-117). Two motivations for this approach can be presented.

- Research results should inform the decisions that people make. Research results are of no use to anyone if they cannot influence the decisions they people are making.
- Research should bring social innovation about. Social innovation includes services, products and new ways of thinking.

5. Building blocks for business ethics: basis for argument

Business ethics is not new to literature. This concept is normally understood as business decisions and activities informed by principles and values. Business ethics may be defined as value-based business. Although slightly different, the concept of "corporate social responsibility" is also used to indicate what the ethical responsibility of business is towards customers, society and the environment.

To substantiate these definitions: Verstraeten and Liedekerke (2010:13-17) define business ethics as the values directing responsible ways of doing business, responsible behaviour in business, society and ecology. Business ethics is not similar to compliance. Business ethics questions moral justification of decisions and actions. It also creates a space of freedom to deal with norm and reality, person and structure and vision, and what is do-able. Business ethics understands the complexity of situations and decisions. To these authors, business ethics is a "*science des moeurs*". It is the scientific investigation of factual opinions, values and behaviour patterns of business people, managers and employees. Business ethics also attends to the impact of ethical and unethical behaviour in businesses. To Shaw and Barry (2004:4-5), business ethics is about moral decision-making in organisations. They define business ethics as "the study of what constitutes right and wrong, or good and bad, human conduct in a business context". The scope of business is any organisation (regardless of size) whose objective it is to provide goods or services for profit. This includes healthcare, public safety, and law enforcement, as well as academic institutions. Business ethics also has the task to look into the moral issues that arise when employers and employees come together.

On the basis of these comments, it is evident that the research into business ethics is multi-phased and is growing in importance to promote justice and responsibility in the way in which business activities are conducted and decisions concluded. "Business" covers both for-profit activities and services. Business ethics can best be described by distinguishing between *good* business and good *business*. Good *business* constitutes profits, capital ventures and economic prosperity. Good business signals values, principles, integrity and trust in the way that people are doing business.

Words and phrases such as responsibility, loyalty, professionalism and sustainability are part of the business ethics jargon.

This paper's epistemological background is found in a value-driven approach to business activities and decisions. The point of departure is universally accepted rules and principles that guide right and wrong conduct in business.

Based on the qualitative research method identified in paragraph 3 the following building blocks for business ethics are presented:
- *Individual decision-making* is based on responsibility, respect and care towards the self, the other, the society, nature and the economy. Responsibility is the basis of all ethical behaviour.
- *Sphere of influence* as proactive engagement with the stakeholder society: crucial in the sphere of influence are informed decision-making, values and services as basis for good business, with no compromise accepted on ethical values.
- The *stakeholder society* as metaphor for engagement with all those people and entities without whom no business activity can succeed: the concept of the stakeholder society is a reminder that business cannot be done or decisions taken in isolation. This is further supported by the idea of service delivery. Service delivery is always directed at the other person.
- *Sustainability* is based on the triple bottom approach and the involvement of economy, society and nature to secure livelihoods for a next generation.
- *Ethics as relationship* is to secure engagement on the basis of trust, integrity and peace.

These building blocks will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

6. Building blocks: design

The following building blocks for business ethics decision-making can be presented:

Core – Individual decision-making

McCoy's "*Parable of the Sadhu*" (1987) addressed the issue of the individual and the corporation's responsibility in decision-making. He confirmed the role of the individual in ethical decision-making but also emphasised that the individual cannot be left alone in making all the decisions. The corporation needs to extend support too. The group has a very prominent role to play especially in supporting the individual. The basis of the argument, however, is that the individual's role can never be ignored. From an anthropological perspective, the individual is the core in any decision taken on value-driven issues.

> When people cannot find such support in their organisations, they don't know how to act. If such support is forthcoming, a person has a stake in the success of the group and can add much to the process of establishing and maintaining a corporate culture (McCoy, 1997:7).

The individual's decision-making is based on *respectful* and *responsible* behaviour towards other people and social institutions. Behaviour towards other people is vested in the promotion of *care* for a fellow person. Respect, responsibility and care in this paper are informed by the perspectives offered by Burggraeve, Heyns and Tilley.

Burggraeve argues (via Levinas) that a person discovers him-\herselve through engagement with other people. In the face of the other, more of oneself is given. This approach can be linked to an ethics of care. This desired behaviour towards oneself and other people is vested in a care relationship. Burggraeve's view that care is central to ethical behaviour is particularly helpful. Care is to take responsibility for other people's well-being (in all facets of human life). Notable is the emphasis not only on human existence but also on assisting other people to take on their responsibility. His view evokes responsibility for the other through engaging with them. This provocative engagement has as outcome the care for other people – either through oneself or through institutionalised care. What we learn from his interpretation is that care is part of our human responsibility and that although we may call on the assistance of others, care for the fellow person can never be waived (Burggraeve, 2015:126-147). Such a view may be imbedded in what Heyns (1972) refers to as a "theology of obedience". In this framework, Heyns argues that responsibility is to be responsive to the

situation facing you. Although the terminology may not be attractive to the autonomous person, this theology is in fact an invitation to the individual to engage with him-/herself. This response is linked to a value basis from which the response is launched. The implication is that engagement can never be removed from a value basis. This view coincides with Douma's (1999) view that all ethics relates to the ethos of existence. Ethos is regarded as the central motive influencing what and why people are doing something. Ethos originates from the Greek word "ethos", meaning that deepest motivation or guiding belief whilst a person is doing something. Tilley (2016) adds useful comments to this building block through her emphasis on respect. Although set in the context of research practice, respect refers to the value treatment of people especially in challenging circumstances (in the context of her study she focused on imprisoned females). The emphasis is not to misuse a situation or to abuse power in any context. This approach can be linked to an ethics of care. This desired behaviour towards oneself and other people is therefore vested in a care relationship.

The recurring phenomenon in these comments is the reciprocal behaviour between people – either as individuals or as a group. The emphasis on the individual as basis for ethical decision-making has nothing to do with a humanistic perspective. The humanistic perspective emphasises that the individual cannot be removed from ethical decision-making. This decision-making is based on responsibility, respect and care.

This approach to decision-making and actions reflects on *humanity* (the value of life, self-determination and actualisation, the dictum of doing no harm, vulnerability, mass communication customised by Facebook and other forms of social media), *environment* (e.g. sustainable livelihoods under threat, impact of technology and robotics, animal rights, conservation, the green revolution) and *morality* (greed, selfism, sexism, racism, ethnoism, absence of reconciliation and fraternity [brotherhood], mercy, care).

Sphere of influence

The *individual decision-making* (as core) should influence and impact on the stakeholders through *value-driven leadership*, *stewardship*, *workplace spirituality* and *corporate social responsibility*.

Value-driven leadership

Value-driven leadership refers to those values informing leadership to accomplish a task to the benefit of society, based on a set of acceptable values.

Stewardship

A specific example of value-driven leadership is stewardship. The term 'stewardship' has over the few past years gained acceptance in governance and policy debates. In the past the concept was often used very narrowly but in recent years it has broadened as a governance process linked to the idea of *good governance*: Saner and Wilson (2003:1) referrers to stewardship as "…

a number of guiding principles for creating effective and legitimate dialogue processes involving government, industry and citizens; in delineating their respective governance responsibilities". Fairholm (2001) argues in favour of a leadership that is most successfully demonstrated by sharing power and responsibility with others in the work community. Coldwell and Hayes (2007:161) highlight the focus on long-term based rather than short-term based strategies, which honour the duties owed to society, build trust within the organisation and improve employee commitment, all of which lead to a sustainable competitive advantage.

Workplace spirituality

Workplace spirituality is not primarily linked to religion in the workplace but rather to how the workplace contributes towards the meaning of existence. This is warranted by, amongst other things, the disconnecting of individuals due to specialisation in organisations (Hart & Neil Brady, 2005:422). Robbins, Bergman, Stagg and Coulter 2003:158 (2003:60) write:

> What is workplace spirituality? It is not about organized religious practices. Rather, it is a recognition of an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of the community. Employees are looking for meaning, purpose and a sense of connectedness or community from their work and their workplace.

Corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility holds the view that business (as service and profit) has responsibility towards society. This obligation goes beyond profit-making and embodies the idea of a constructive contribution towards society (Verstraeten & Liedekerke, 2010:216, 228).

The commonality if these attributes are the link between value and activity, be it through leadership, engagement with colleagues and/or public participation and responsibility. As in the core of the proposed building blocks, values should be the driver for all human engagement.

The sphere of influence should lead to informed decisions that will be a reflection of integrity and values. Here, in particular, Badaracco's "Defining

moments" (1997) and "Leading quietly" (2012) are very helpful. In "Defining moments" the focus is on the difficult choices the individual has to make based on personal values and commitments. "Leading quietly" is about the value that doing the right thing has for an organisation. This is accomplished through decisions on dealing with what is best for the organisation, employees and oneself and not a platform for heroes and risk-takers to build egos.

The impact that the core should have on the sphere of influence is an illustration of how personal value and integrity should be the basis for engagement with stakeholders and that both value and integrity should shape this influence. Here too Badaracco's "The good struggle" (2006) is what should be accomplished to combat the influence of the "invisible hands" – the powerful and pervasive markets that shape almost everything.

From these comments it is evident that individuals and organisations have an irrevocable responsibility towards society (as individuals, groups and organisations) through service or profit and that neither the individual nor the organisation can exist for own benefit only.

Stakeholders

The stakeholder society refers to those people who can either influence an organisation or who are influenced by the decisions of the organisation. The stakeholder is not without rights, duties and/or responsibilities. This concept is very much linked to the labour movement. It is widely accepted that an organisation will cease to exist without its stakeholders.

Within the context of the building blocks presented in this paper, the stakeholder can also be part of the core, namely through individual decision-making. Stakeholders in this paper are presented as the people or organisations that need to be influenced on the basis of the value systems of the core.

In addition, the organisations here should not be limited to business organisations only but should be extended to include the entities and people identified in paragraph 2.

Looking more attentively to the stakeholder society, we learned from Freeman (1984), who detailed this concept, that management has the responsibility to address values in the organisation. It is a matter of dealing with the really important values that will shape the organisation and its business. For the purposes of this paper, the importance of the stakeholder society is that, while its values should be understood, they should also be influenced by the core. The stakeholder society also reminds us that nobody can afford to ignore any person and/or group who has an influence on the activities of

the organisation; or for the core to act in isolation of any group. This relates to Freeman's comment that strategic management as integrative exercise needs to bring all (diverse) activities together to address these challenges. The importance of this comment confirms reciprocity in business and the importance of values to bring harmony to all activities.

Sustainability as a long term strategy

Sustainability is normally understood as a matter of preserving economy, society and nature (the three pillars of sustainability) to ensure future generations (fourth pillar). In general the focus is on economic viability and lasting communities and livelihoods for the future.

Sustainability can also be regarded as a socio-ecological process based on common pursuit of an ideal. In monetary terms it is not about making a "once-off profit" only. Sustainability in society, especially, includes important activities such as the sustaining of the quality of human life. This quality cannot be removed from good and just values for society. It is precisely the decisions that people will take that can secure endurance. More importantly, it is not only the decisions taken or the services delivered but rather how these decisions were taken and how the services were delivered. This approach can be labelled as a "green strategy" and links up with Elkington's (1997) "Triple bottom line" (profit, people and planet) which suggests that business decisions cannot be isolated from the social and natural environments in which we live. It should be evident that sustainability in decision-making is not about "adding on" but rather about building strategies and activities around social, economic and environmental considerations. Such an approach is fundamental in business ethics and accounts for responsibility and accountability in how people engage with each other in a business context.

Ethics as relationship

This sustainability is supported by ethics as relationship. Ethics as relationship embodies the idea that a person is in a relationship with him-/herself and people, structure (example organisations) and nature. This relationship is aimed at uplifting other people, structure and nature to the benefit of all (Schotmans, 2012).

The crux of this building block is the constructive engagement with people, structure and nature to ensure lasting relationships.

7. Building blocks: image

These building blocks can be graphically presented in a matrix model that confirms how the different parts contribute to a holistic framework for decision-making in business:
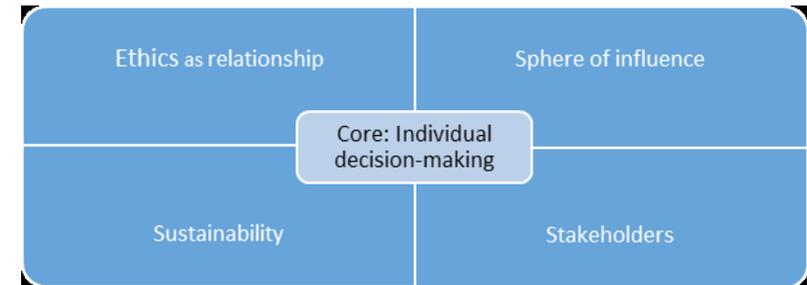
Graph 1: Building blocks for ethical decision-making in business

8. Building blocks: evaluation

This paper presented five building blocks for ethical decision-making in business. The building blocks are based on five major premises:

- Business is more than profit-driven activities only and includes services. These activities and services cannot go without a value basis. The value basis is a result of personal (ethos) or organisational orientation (values, strategy and strategic intent) and aims at harmonising relationships beyond the individual and within and beyond the organisation.
- Due to the influence of the market economy on all spheres of human existence, human activity needs to be directed at value creation for people, structure and nature. At the same time value needs to be created in all human activities, especially those activities that are subjected by the market economy although these activities (such as care, education, personal relationships) were never meant to be dominated by market forces.
- Ethical decision-making is much more than understanding the complexity of a situation or the creating of awareness only. Ethical decision-making aims at understanding a problem, solving a problem and creating long-term value through the decision-making. The purpose of the decision-making is to have relationships with people, structure and nature.

- Business ethics entails much more than value-driven business, responsible profit-taking or quality of service. The aim is to secure sustainability within organisations, to develop sustainable livelihoods and to promote a just and equitable society.
- The logic of the building blocks for ethical decision-making is that the no decision can be removed from responsibility. Responsibility cannot be limited to accountability or compliance. Responsibility is fundamentally to care for the well-being of people, structure and nature. Without this care approach there can be no social justice.

9. Summary

The objective of this paper is to understand individual and organisational responsibility in business decision-making. The paper aims at unpacking the complexity of business as profit or service and the influence of a market economy on societal life and activities. Based on this understanding a five-building-block ethical decision-making framework was presented.

This paper identifies the following major features in business ethics.

- Business refers to both profit-making activities and services delivered.
- The market economy influences societal life to such an extent that all activities are influenced by economic orientation.
- This matter is further complicated through the growing experience economy or the common belief that meaning is constituted through business activity.
- Decision-making impacts on the person who takes the decision as well as on society, structure, culture and nature.
- Responsibility is a human endeavour. When a decision is taken on behalf of the organisation, then there is a collective responsibility.
- Individual responsibility can never be waived; it is however very often underplayed in business ethics.
- Business can contribute to unity, peace and social justice.
- Responsibility as ethical behaviour aims at value creation – for the individual, the group, society, structure and nature.
- Responsibility calls on sustainability and relationship building.
- Business ethics can be defined as responsible decisions and activities influencing profit-making and service delivery to create value, sustainability and relationships for the individual, society, structure, culture and nature.

Based on these features, the following building blocks were presented:

- Individual decision-making contributing to responsibility and care
- Sphere of influence to optimise business value
- Stakeholder society to build justice and equity
- Sustainability to secure well-being and livelihoods
- Relationships to promote durability of engagement

The research method was honoured in that the paper reflects on the existing dialogue in business ethics and on the meaning thereof for these building blocks.

The gap in the existing knowledge basis is addressed through the following two contributions:

- The role of individual decision-making, responsibility and care for society was emphasised and promoted.
- The building blocks was presented as a framework that can promote sustainability, relations, care and well-being in business as profit and service.

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