

FOREWORD

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A few years ago I was deeply upset by a colleague who told me about a failing grade he had given to a young woman. The woman had been the victim of a serious illness and had less than a year to live. Her desperate hope was to complete her university degree before her death. If she passed this particular course, her dreams would be fulfilled; failure meant never achieving her dying wish. From my colleague's standpoint, he was simply carrying out business as usual. If a student didn't achieve a passing mark, a failing grade was the necessary result. Full stop. For me the action was brutally inhumane. I pleaded with him to seek an alternative. In effect, I found the assignment of a failing mark unethical. It was then that I also became aware that indeed the common tradition of assigning grades was not simply a practical matter. It represented an ethical orientation; it was lodged in a longstanding "sense of the good." At the same time, the unreflective assignment of grades was also ethically questionable. When closely examined, then, in our everyday organizational life together, we had a significant ethical dilemma on our hands.

This was an illuminating moment of recognition for me. However, for Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo - the authors of this wonderfully engaging book - the ethical dimensions of everyday life is a major focus of continuing concern. For them, organizational life is not simply composed of activities that are more or less functional in terms of one or more practical

ends. Rather, organizational life is suffused with ethical issues; visions of the good are inescapably insinuated into all our otherwise practical activities.

To understand how this is so, Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo develop a compelling view of the organization as a process of active meaning making. As we speak with each other, as we explain our actions, as we tell stories of the organization, we are not only creating the realities we live by, but also a shared sense of the good. In our conversations we are also subtly defining each other - for example, as worthy of respect or admiration - or not. Issues of the good and the worthy are always with us. At the same time, meaning making is in continuous motion, with multiple views of the real and the good often conflicting. The result is that questions of what is good and how should we best behave in the organization are highly complex.

At this point, one might attempt to articulate a series of organizational values, and to examine their particular applications. Indeed, this is the practice of many organizations, striving as they do for values clarification. However, while discussions of organizational values can make a vitalizing contribution to organizational life, the resulting slates of abstract values - "these are the values we stand by" - are largely inconsequential. It is not simply that over time the value statements typically find themselves picking up dust on the shelf. Rather, such values are stated in the abstract, and there is little means of knowing how they apply in any given circumstance. Further, the importance of various values waxes and wanes with time. New values come into prominence (e.g. environmentalism, localism), and earlier commitments no longer seem so relevant. And, forever, there is competition among competing goods. So, very wisely, in my view, the authors steer clear of presenting their own slate of values for organizational life. Rather, they

sagaciously return to consider the origin of values and their conflicts, namely persons in relationship. The result is a vision of relational ethics, one that sustains the very possibility of ethical action.

Of particular significance, they see within the process of daily conversation the grounds for a morally responsive and responsible organization. There are, as they elaborate, ways of talking that generate mutual respect and willingness to cooperate. To be morally responsible in this case is to be responsible to processes of dialogue out of which mutually beneficial forms of life are generated. In effect, the emphasis is on relational responsibility. As they illustrate various moral failures in dialogue, and explain relevant theoretical ideas, they teach us to reflect on our ways of talking and to examine their consequences. They point the way to effective skills for ethical meaning making.

One comes away from this book realizing that when it comes to ordinary conversation, just “doing what comes naturally” is a potential threat to organizational life. In these simple exchanges we create the organization – for good or ill. Reflection is essential. In the reflections of Gitte Haslebo and Maja Loua Haslebo, we find the path to the good illuminated. For this we should be deeply grateful.