

Anna Remišová

*Cand. Sci. (Philos.) Prof.,
anna.remisova@fm.uniba.sk*

*Faculty of Management,
Comenius University in Bratislava,
Bratislava , Slovakia*

Anna Lašáková

*Assoc. Prof.,
anna.lasakova@fm.uniba.sk*

*Faculty of Management,
Comenius University in Bratislava,
Bratislava , Slovakia*

On the role of unethical organizational culture in managerial decision-making

Annotation. *The managerial decision-making is being discussed in management literature from an ethical standpoint for more than thirty years already. However, increased attention to this phenomenon was aroused in both the business and in public just a couple of years ago along with the ethical scandals of once successful global corporations and the economic crisis at the end of the first decade of new millennium. Downturn, and eventually also liquidations of companies like Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, Andersen, or Parmalat were triggered by ethical failures of top managers and as such they definitely refuted negativistic attitudes of the ethical sceptics toward the role of ethics in business. Practitioners and academics started to intensely discuss, how to manage and minimize the risk of managerial unethical decision-making. Because the unethical decisions of managers could be costly both financially and morally, this study has focused on the organization-bound reasons of why managers decide for an unethical action. We were interested especially in the role of the unethical organizational culture in managerial decision-making and in its capacity to drive wrongful managerial decisions.*

Keywords: *ethics, ethical organizational culture, managerial decision-making, unethical leadership.*

Theoretical insights

The unethical decision-making represents an extremely complex process that entails a vast variety of elements and interplaying factors, some of them being latent and thus not «objectively» observable. Current academic literature pays enormous attention to the ethical quality of decision-making, especially in respect to actors at the top of societal or company pyramids. This issue is investigated from various perspectives, usually combining moral philosophy, management, sociology, or psychology. In addition, articles building on specific

methods of neuroscience and neurophysiology have gained attention of scholars in the new millennium, too ¹.

In general, it is widely agreed in the literature that managerial ethical behavior, especially at the top of companies, have a positive impact on companies' economic success and as that the ethical leadership is indispensable for long-term socially responsible development of all companies ². On the other hand, unethical decisions of company executives may have far reaching and devastating effects. Immoral management may have vicious impact on essential organizational variables like employee turnover intentions, negative attitude towards the leader, lower employee well-being, lower individual performance, and counter-productive work behavior in particular ³.

Literature on unethical decision-making focuses mostly on constructing models that would best reflect this complex issue. In a sense prototypical approach is to enumerate elements of decision-making and factors that induce it. *Individual factors* and *non-individual factors* are the two main categories outlined in the literature. The main criterion for this classification is the relation toward the decisional subject; the first category entails inner characteristics of the subject, while the latter regards outside, external factors relating to the environment, in which an individual decides. The non-individual factors can be classified further as *organizational* and *societal* (macro-environmental) factors affecting the decision-making. For instance Remišová considers as non-individual societal factors the state of public opinion together with the political, cultural legislative and economic conditions in the society ⁴.

¹ Greene J. D., Nystrom, L. E., Engell, A. D., Darley, J. M., & Cohen, J. D. The neural bases of cognitive conflict and control in moral judgment // *Neuron*. 2004. — No 44(2). — P. 389–400; Reynolds, S. J. A neurocognitive model of the ethical decision-making process: Implications for study and practice // *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 2006. — No 91(4). — P. 737 – 748; Robertson, D., Snarey, J., Ousley, O., Harenski, K., Bowman, F., Gilkey, R., & Kilts, C. The neural processing of moral sensitivity to issues of justice and care // *Neuropsychologia*. 2007. — No 45(4). — P. 755–766.

² Kakabadse, N. K., Rozuel, C., & Lee-Davies, L. Corporate social responsibility and stakeholder approach: A conceptual review // *International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics*. 2005. — No 1(4). — P. 277–302; Fry, L. W., & Slocum, J. W. Jr. Maximizing the triple bottom line through spiritual leadership // *Organizational Dynamics*. 2008. — No 37(1). — P. 86–96; Coldwell, S. R., & Joshi, A. W. Corporate ecological responsiveness: Antecedent effects of institutional pressure and top management commitment and their impact on organizational performance // *Business Strategy and the Environment*. 2001. — No 22(2). — P. 73–91.

³ Schyns, B., & Schilling, J. How bad are the effects of bad leaders? A meta-analysis of destructive leadership and its outcomes // *The Leadership Quarterly*. 2013. — No 24(1). — P. 138–158.

⁴ Remišová, A. *Etika a ekonomika* / Bratislava: Kalligram, 2011. — 496 s.

According to three major reviews of academic literature on the factors affecting decision-making done for a large time span of more than thirty years⁵, the majority of studies concentrates on the impact of the individual factors on decision-making like age, gender, nationality, religion, personal values, awareness, cognitive moral development, education, job experience, and various personality attributes like locus of control, Machiavellianism, need for cognition, acceptance of authority, or neuroticism. On the other hand, somewhat *less attention is paid to the non-individual, organizational factors and their impact on decision-making*. Usually, studies on non-individual factors entail issues of top management influence⁶, codes of ethics and related formal ethics management mechanisms like ethics programs and rewards and disciplinary actions employed in the organization⁷, organizational climate⁸, and ethics trainings⁹.

⁵ Ford, R. C., & Richardson, W. D. Ethical decision making: A review of the empirical literature // Journal of Business Ethics. 1994. — No 13(3). — P. 205–221; O'Fallon, M. J., & Butterfield, K. D. A review of the empirical ethical decision-making literature: 1996–2003 // Journal of Business Ethics. 2015. — No 59(4). — P. 375–413; Craft, J. L. A review of the empirical ethical decision-making literature: 2004–2011 // Journal of Business Ethics. 2013. — No 117(2). — P. 221–259.

⁶ Murphy, P. R., Smith, J. E., & Daley, J. M. Executive attitudes, organizational size and ethical issues: Perspectives on a service industry // Journal of Business Ethics. 1992. — No 11(1). — P. 11–19; Trevino, L. K. Out of touch: The CEO's role in corporate misbehavior // Brooklyn Law Review. 2005. — No 70(4). — P. 1195–1211; Weaver, G. R., Trevino, L. K., & Agle, B. «Somebody I look up to»: Ethical role models in organizations // Organizational Dynamics. 2005. — No 34(4). — P. 313–330.

⁷ Weaver, G. R., & Trevino, L. K. Compliance and values oriented ethics programs: Influences on employees' attitudes and behavior // Business Ethics Quarterly. 1999. — No 9(2). — P. 315–335; Nijhof, A., Fisscher, O., & Looise, J. K. Coercion, guidance and mercifulness: The different influences of ethics programs on decision-making // Journal of Business Ethics. 2000. — No 27(1). — P. 33–42; McKinney, J. A., Emerson, T. L., & Neubert, M. J. The effects of ethical codes on ethical perceptions of actions toward stakeholders // Journal of Business Ethics. 2010. — No 97(4). — P. 505–516; Kaptein, M. Toward effective codes: Testing the relationship with unethical behavior // Journal of Business Ethics. 2011. — No 99(2). — P. 233–251; Ruiz, P., Martinez, R., Rodrigo, J., & Dias, C. Level of coherence among ethics program components and its impact on ethical intent // Journal of Business Ethics. 2015. — No 128(4). — P. 725–742.

⁸ Barnett, T., & Vaicys, C. The moderating effect of individuals' perceptions of ethical work climate on ethical judgments and behavioral intentions // Journal of Business Ethics. 2000. — No 27(4). — P. 351–362; Sweeney, B., Arnold, D., & Pierce, B. The impact of perceived ethical culture of the firm and demographic variables on auditors' ethical evaluation and intention to act decisions // Journal of Business Ethics. 2010. — No 93(4). — P. 531–551; Kaptein, M. Understanding unethical behavior by unravelling ethical culture // Human Relations. 2011. — No 64(6). — P. 843–869.

⁹ Kavathatzopoulos, I. Training professional managers in decision-making about real life business ethics problems: The acquisition of the autonomous problem-solving skill // Journal of Business Ethics. 1994. — No 13(5). — P. 379–386; Frisque, D. A., & Kolb, J. A. The effects of an ethics training program on attitude, knowledge, and transfer of training of office professionals:

To add to the empirical evidence on the somewhat less researched organizational factors inducing managers' unethical decisions in companies, we have decided to inspect their role within the Slovak conditions. Thus, this study has concentrated on organizational factors, which are theorized to *be able to change the ethical stance of managers and consecutively elicit unethical actions*. Stemming from the decision-making model of Jones¹⁰, the focus was on the phase of «moral intent to act». Jones builds on the Kelman a Hamilton's definition of crimes of obedience and delineates an ethical decision as «a decision that is both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community. Conversely, an *unethical decision* is either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community»¹¹. Based on his assumption, we have investigated the organization-bound reasons of *why managers decide for an unethical action* although they know that this decision is not in line with universal ethical principles. More specifically, the basic research question was: *What is the role of unethical organizational culture in unethical managerial decision-making?* We were interested particularly in this issue because the company management and the company culture are intertwined phenomena. As Schein have noted, managers play a central role in creating the character of the company culture by what do they consider important, what they control, measure, systematically pay attention to; by the way how they resolve crisis situations at workplace, and by the criteria they use in selection, promotion or in disciplining the subordinates¹². Employees are deeply affected by the above mentioned processes, while they interpret and re-interpret behavior of their managers. To avoid any misunderstandings, managers should intensely communicate with the employees and explain the reasons of their decisions and actions. If managers' decisions do not endorse the formally manifested organizational values (or are even contradictory to those values), a loss of trust in relations between employees and managers will follow. Particularly serious problem will arise in case managers violate ethical standards and thus instill an unethical organizational culture.

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¹⁰ Jones, T. M. Ethical decision-making by individuals in organizations: An issue contingent model // Academy of Management Review. 1991. – No 16(12). – P. 366–395.

¹¹ Jones, T. M. Ethical decision-making by individuals in organizations: An issue contingent model // Academy of Management Review. 1991. – No 16(12). – P. 367.

¹² Schein, E. H. Organizational culture and leadership / San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004. – P. 246 – 262.

Methodological background

To investigate these issues thoroughly, an empirical study on a sample of 799 managers was conducted, being it the first study of its kind and scope in the Slovak business environment. The call for participation with the link to e-questionnaire was disseminated through various channels (press releases, professional associations, managerial conference events, HR departments, alumni clubs, etc.) in order to obtain a varied sample that would cover diverse organizational backgrounds. Respondents were asked to assess the influence of selected factors on a 7-point scale ranging from «this factor does not elicit unethical decisions at all» to «this factor considerably elicits unethical decisions». Responses of managers were based on assessment of their own experiences with the respective factors that represent the organizational context, in which managers make decisions on a day-to-day basis. More specifically, we have investigated factors related to bad (ineffective) organization of workflow; unfair human resource management policies; unethical organizational culture; ambiguity in company which behaviors are ethical/unethical; superiors' interest in results and not in the way how they were achieved; shareholders/owners' interest in profit without considering the way how to get it; pressures from business partners aimed to gain advantage; and unethical behavior of superiors. In addition, we have examined also two situation-specific factors, namely the critical economic situation in the company and stress (time pressure) in making managerial decisions.

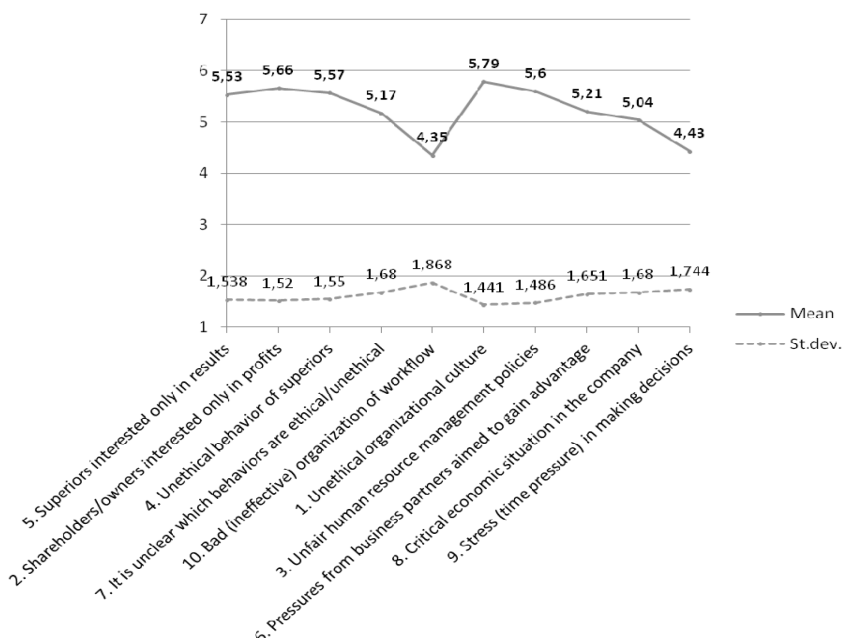
Results and discussion

Results (see Graph 1) showed that the unethical organizational culture was perceived by Slovak respondents as the most influential factor to foster wrongful decisions of managers and as such *is quite explanatory in regard to managerial unethical decision-making* (with $M = 5,79$).

The second most influential is the factor of a «profits-only» perspective of company shareholders and owners ($M = 5,66$). The unfair human resource management (HRM) policies have ranked third ($M = 5,60$). Quite similar mean values were noted in respect to factors of unethical supervisory behavior ($M = 5,57$) and superiors' interest in results without considering the way how these were obtained ($M = 5,53$). Further, the coercion to make an unethical decision exerted on managers by business partners ranked as sixth and the absence of clear ethical rules of employee behavior ranked as the seventh ($M = 5,21$ and $M = 5,17$, respectively). Somewhat lower influence was ascribed to the critical economic situation in the company ($M = 5,04$). Finally, managers have perceived as the least influential, but still noteworthy, the factor of stress related to time pressure in decision-making ($M = 4,43$) and the factor of ineffective workflow organization ($M = 4,35$).

Graph 1

Descriptive analysis for factors eliciting managerial unethical decision-making



Note: Mean value measured on a 7-point scale ranging from «this factor does not elicit unethical decisions at all» to «this factor considerably elicits unethical decisions». Source: own research.

Our results correlate with results of other studies that paid attention to scandals and destruction linked to unethical behavior of corporate governance boards, boards of directors, and top executives in major corporations. For instance, Enron had its own code of ethics; however the code was not embedded in its organizational culture and thus exemplified only a dysfunctional internal regulation. The true organizational culture of Enron has been characterized as a „cowboy culture«, in which the rules were routinely broken and aggressive, individualistic employee behavior was rewarded ¹³.

An ethical organizational culture is firmly rooted in ethical values that are organically embedded in the company's mission and further specified in the company's code of ethics. These values and ethical principles are

¹³ Stevens, B. Corporate ethical codes: Effective instruments for influencing behavior // Journal of Business Ethics. 2008. — No 78(4). — P. 601–609.

disseminated throughout the whole company by consistent communication and behavior of the company management, that is, from the supervisory board, management board and senior executives toward all other managers and employees. In an ethical organizational culture it is considered appropriate to discipline employees who break ethical rules and to reward those who are ethically compliant. Companies should therefore develop strong cultures where employees are supported and acknowledged for following the ethical requirements, where managers are monitored for behaving consistently with the code and where open communication is regarded as pivotal to effective ethics management ¹⁴. Financially successful companies have strong ethical values that do not collide with economic values ¹⁵. As Trevino assumed, in weak cultures, the values, goals, purposes and beliefs of the organization are not clear; hence, diverse subcultures with their own assumptions are likely to exist ¹⁶. However, if code of ethics and related ethical requirements are embedded in the culture and embraced by the leaders, they have the potential to positively influence employee ethical behavior ¹⁷.

Our results imply also a *high level of responsibility of senior executives for lower-level managers' unethical conduct*. The quality of corporate governance relates to the practices and values of two key management levels, the supervisory board and top executives. In this context, Kouzes and Posner note that great leaders just like great companies do create first of all a meaning, and not just money ¹⁸. If the main value and source of social prestige is only in economic profits, the top management suite will set a clear tone at the top of the company that only profit is what matters. The profit is the only thing that is both desired and desirable. Our results imply that *such a signal from the top creates a wide space for unethical and illegal behavior in the company*. Prioritization of the economic rationality at the expense of the ethical rationality in business, accompanied by the individual managers' greed, may lead eventually to

¹⁴ Trevino, L. K., Brown, M., & Hartman, L. P. A qualitative investigation of perceived executive ethical leadership: Perceptions from inside and outside the executive suite // Human Relations. 2003. — No 56(1). — P. 5 — 37; Uhl-Bien, M., & Carsten, M. K. Being ethical when the boss is not // Organizational Dynamics. 2007. — No 36(2). — P. 187–201.

¹⁵ Collins, J., & Porras, J. I. Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies / New York: Harper, 2004. — 368 p.

¹⁶ Trevino, L. K. Ethical decision making in organizations: A person-situation interactionist model // Academy of Management Review. 1986. — No 11(3). — P. 601–617.

¹⁷ Stevens, B. Corporate ethical codes: Effective instruments for influencing behavior // Journal of Business Ethics. 2008. — No 78(4). — P. 601–609.

¹⁸ Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. The Leadership Challenge / San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003. — 496 p.

destruction of the entire company and related serious damage to company stakeholders. Authors Schwartz, Dunfee, and Kline assume that corporate boards have to set a clear ethical tone¹⁹. As Stevens adds, «the message of valuing ethics should come from the top as a key part of corporate strategy»²⁰.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that the key to unethical decisions of managers is the unethical culture at workplace. Besides this toxic phenomenon, also the one-sided prioritization of economic success at any expense that is formed by attitudes of company owners and top executives toward the way how economic aims should be met, is significantly influential in the context of managerial unethical decision-making. This unidimensional results-driven orientation at the top of companies influences predominantly the change in managerial intent to act ethically and as such it fosters wrong decisions. In case the economic rationality dominates over the ethical rationality in business, managers, who would otherwise behave ethically, will consciously make an unethical decision, if put under pressure by higher superiors or company shareholders. The relation between economic and ethical rationalities is widely discussed in the literature and is regarded as one of the chief issues in business ethics²¹. Our results confirm that a wide space for unethical decision-making of managers (and consecutively also of employees) will be created if company owners are not interested in ways how profit is being achieved and if they promote an unethical culture at workplace.

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¹⁹ Schwartz, M. S. Dunfee, T. W., & Kline, M. J. Tone at the top: An ethics code for directors? // *Journal of Business Ethics*. 2005. – No 58(1). – P. 79–100.

²⁰ Stevens, B. Corporate ethical codes: Effective instruments for influencing behavior // *Journal of Business Ethics*. 2008. – No 78(4). – P. 606.

²¹ Ulrich, P. *Integrative Wirtschaftsethik. Grundlagen einer lebensdienlichen Ökonomie* / Bern-Stuttgart-Wien: Haupt, 1997. – 517 p.; Remišová, A. *Podnikatesská etika. Úvod do problematiky* / Bratislava: Ekonóm, 1997. – 240 s.; Márton, M. *Poznámky k ekonomickej racionalite, hodnotám a ku globalizácii* // *Ekonomický časopis*. 2005. – No 53(7). – P. 680–694; Remišová, A. *Etika a ekonomika* / Bratislava: Kalligram, 2011. – 496 s.

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