

Embedding Humanizing Cultures in Organizations through Moral Identity and Institutional Leadership: The 'Strategic' Role of HRM

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ABSTRACT

Building on dissatisfaction with increasing emphasis on concepts and solutions such as 'sustainability proceduralization' or 'creating shared value', which entail a superficial conception of the firm's moral agency and role in society, this paper is based on three general premises. First, it adheres to the Catholic Social Thought's view of the enterprise as a community of work. Second, it draws some insights from recent developments in virtue ethics elaborating on MacIntyre's work, with special regard to how firms can be able to develop an organizational moral character and promote virtue among their members. The third premise is about organizational culture, considered as shared values and commitments that have an influence on relationships and actions of persons in organizations; in particular, it is suggested that the moral character of the enterprise reflects the development of an organizational 'humanizing culture' revolving around the principles of human dignity and the common good.

The paper claims that Human Resource Management (HRM) can provide essential support for the development of organizational humanizing cultures. Whereas this is partly in line with the emerging call for scholars and practitioners to treat HRM and the sphere of socially responsible behavior of enterprises as interdependent domains, the paper intends to delve deeper into the recurrent but often only sketchily explored conception that HR professionals have a key role to play in integrating ethically-driven principles within organizational cultures. It tries to do so by dwelling on and connecting two basic points. First, it elaborates on the idea that embedding ethical organizational cultures primarily involves an influence on the development of employees' moral identity, so as to build virtuous behavior repertoires. In particular, it is highlighted how HR managers may significantly contribute to generating this organizational 'formative context', by means of their established functions (including recruitment and selection, training, performance assessment and rewarding) and, more profoundly, by creating experiential, relational and symbolic venues and opportunities that favor the nurturing of a collective moral identity oriented toward the common good of the firm and of society. Secondly, it is suggested that, operating in that way, the HR manager can participate directly in the crucial processes of 'institutional leadership'; i.e., taking inspiration from the perspective of the sociologist Philip Selznick, the capacity to act as a co-producer of an organization's moral character.

The paper concludes by stressing that the proposed framework brings to light a deeper sense in which companies committed to creating humanizing cultures can conceive of – and unleash – the strategic potential of HRM.