

# The Ethical Competence Framework

## Introduction

by Desmond Berghofer

The requirements for success are changing. Individuals and organizations are being judged by measures at once as old as civil society but at the same time as new as the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No longer is it sufficient merely to generate a healthy financial bottom line, but increasingly we are being challenged to justify our success in terms of how well we support one another and how we care for the natural world on which all life depends.

The new measures are grounded in the age-old concept of ethics—the study of human conduct with emphasis on the determination of right and wrong. These principles lie at the core of all major spiritual traditions. They have been the gold standard for human behaviour for millennia. But their application in modern economic industrialized society has been twisted and tangled in pursuit of another less noble principle—expediency: grasping for advantage rather than for what is right.

However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is governed by a new watchword: interdependence. Economies and cultures are now so intertwined that the pursuit of advantage in one quarter based on self interest without due regard to its impact on others can set off a chain reaction that ultimately bedevils everyone. In this environment the old has become new again. The ethical rules of the past acquire a new and urgent prominence in the present. We are challenged as individuals, organizations and society to become ethically competent.

To be competent means having an ability in sufficient measure that one can perform at an acceptable standard. These are all subjective terms. What is sufficient? How much is acceptable? What is the standard? The answers come slowly and tortuously out of conflict and consequences. The process is hard learning, and the question is always whether we will collectively learn fast enough and well enough to avoid the worst of the consequences.

We are therefore in the process of defining what it means to be ethically competent in an interdependent world. A further challenge is speed. In large measure local and global interdependence are driven by the speed of communications and the rapidity with which new knowledge replaces old. Under such conditions foundational beliefs of what is right or wrong become both urgent and important to avoid a precipitous slide into chaos.

## **Relationship to Emotional Competence**

Ethical competence is closely associated with the concept of emotional competence, which determines how well we handle ourselves and each other. Groundbreaking work was done in the 1990s by Daniel Goleman on promoting emotional intelligence as the new yardstick for measuring success at work. Though Goleman did not forge the link between ethics and emotions very forcefully, it is clear that a case can be made for a concept of ethical intelligence giving rise to ethical competence as a step beyond showing how emotional intelligence determines success in the workplace and in society.

Goleman defined emotional competence as “a learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance at work.” Though difficult to measure, emotional intelligence is observable as the quality that distinguishes successful performance beyond training and expertise and high cognitive intelligence as measured by IQ tests.

Similarly, it can be argued that ethical competence is a learned capability based on ethical intelligence that results in smooth harmonious and peaceful relationships at every level in society. Like emotional competence it is difficult to measure, but its presence or absence in an individual, organization or society is readily observable. As we have witnessed in recent years high profile examples of ethical incompetence—from the Enron debacle in business to the tainted blood scandal in public health—we begin to wonder whether there is not some way that we can set a standard of ethical competence that leads to practices that are teachable and able to be learned and that would raise the level of ethical behaviour at every level.

## **The Ethical Competence Framework**

The Ethical Competence Framework provides a way to do this. It builds on the concept of the Emotional Competence Framework presented by Goleman in *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998). The Ethical Competence Framework incorporates three dimensions of competence, beginning with the personal and moving through social competence to global competence. By including the last dimension recognition is given to the new imperative of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely, that the ultimate determinant of success for humanity is our ability to create a harmonious sustainable global civilization on a finite planet.

Each dimension of the Ethical Competence Framework is further divided into descriptive components that generate in total 30 items that are grouped into the Ethical Competence Scale. By assigning values from 1 to 10 for each of the 30 items a score can be obtained, which expressed as a percentage, becomes the Ethical Quotient (EthQ), following the tradition of expressing cognitive intelligence as the Intelligence Quotient or IQ.

No claim is made that the Ethical Quotient is an accurate or distinguishing measure between individuals or organizations on their level of ethical competence. However, the process of using the scale in combination with the Ethical Competence Framework provides a rigorous and effective teaching and learning tool that can move people singly and collectively towards understanding what is required for ethical competence.

### **High Stakes**

More significant than the actual EthQ score is the information and reflection provided to those who use the scale of their relative strengths in ethical competence and the areas where improvement is warranted. To the extent that all of us individually and collectively work to improve perceived ethical deficiencies in our behaviour, so goes the future of the world. Most important of all is the need to incorporate strong ethical competence in powerful business, industrial and government organizations; otherwise we can face a horrendous future governed by fear and abuse of devastating power.

The stakes are high for humanity and all life on Earth. The ethical challenge has never been greater. The call is for ethical leadership to incorporate strong teaching on ethical competence at all levels in society and across the interdependent world.