

**Tuesday/Thursday
2:30-4.00 PM
Robert B McKersie**

15. S40 TACKLING THE BIG POLICY ISSUES THROUGH LITERATURE AND FILM

Protecting the environment and preserving growth, aligning ethics with scientific progress, restructuring the criminal justice system for optimum accountability, balancing conscience and national security, creating social movements for change, redefining the American Dream--these are some of the issues at the center of debate and policy analysis that leaders must take into account as they manage in a global economy in the 21st century and will be the touchstones for this course. Your understanding of these issues will determine, in no small measure, your success as a manager. In other words, it is no longer enough to be just a competent professional to succeed in the today's and tomorrow's business climate, one needs to understand the complexity and consequences of what can be called the Big Problems facing society today.

Big problems are everywhere. By first studying literature that depict human beings coping with tough issues in a variety of settings, we can gain new perspectives and understanding that will inform our examination of the policy and managerial issues presented by these major challenges.

Each week we will address a new topic. The first session is devoted to an in-depth discussion of a story or film, identifying the major dilemmas and issues that are present in these pieces of literature. With these perspectives in hand, the second session will analyze the “big picture.” We will draw on the expertise of MIT faculty, helping us understand the latest thinking about these problems.

For some of the stories we will use video segments to dramatize the challenges that the main characters confront and manage. These are drawn from movies that are available for the stories that we will study during the course.

In order for the workload to be manageable we need a division of labor. So each student will be responsible for briefing the class on the story and other resources assigned for that week. So we will have six teams organized for this purpose.

After each class (Tuesday's session devoted to the story and Thursday's session devoted to a policy discussion) I would like each student too prepare a short write up (maximum one page) addressing: (1) What are the important lessons in the story and (2) What are the takeaways for how we think about policy in this domain?

The course is taken on a pass/fail basis.

To provide a better picture of this half semester course the six sessions are outlined. (The course design is a work in progress, so some of the supplemental readings may be changed). The questions are far from exhaustive and serve as background for our discussions.

WEEK 1: Security of the State vs. Matters of Conscience

Part 1: Antigone, by Sophocles

Questions

- Is it possible to enact the security of the state (Creon) and not violate personal standards and freedoms (Antigone)?
- How does an advisor (Tiresias) warn a ruler or help the ruler (Creon) change course without becoming the messenger who is killed? Is his dilemma similar to that facing Antigone: honoring the laws of the state vs the dictates of conscience?

Part II: "Snowden" movie (2016)

Resource person: political scientist with expertise in national security

Questions

- What are the similarities and differences in actions taken by Creon and Pres. George W. Bush after 9-11 (both facing existential threats)?

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- Are the actions and matters of conscience of Snowden similar to those of Antigone?
- Why is it so difficult for leaders to reverse course and admit error?

Week 2: Activism on Behalf of the Environment

Part 1: *Enemy of the People*, by Henrik Ibsen

Questions

- Is it inevitable that the person holding the minority point of view (Dr. Stockman) will always be seen as the “enemy”?
- Why was the whistleblower (Dr. Stockman) not more effective in achieving his objectives?

Part 2: A Case Study of Flint, Michigan

Resource person: civil engineering faculty

Questions

- What are the reasons why so few people choose to be whistleblowers?
- Why did the leaders (City of Flint, Michigan state) look the other way when they became aware of problems with the water supply?
- Does it take a crisis (e.g., a cover-up that becomes known) to bring about change?
- Given the many stakeholders with multiple interests, is it ever possible to achieve consensus on a course of action to address environmental issues?
- Given our knowledge about how environmental problems develop, why do they continue to occur and what are the lessons for management?

Week 3: Scientific Inquiry and its Ethical Dilemmas

Part 1: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

Questions

- Why is Frankenstein referred to as the “modern Prometheus”? What drives him to create life?
- Did Frankenstein make the right decision by not creating a mate for the creature (his first creation)?

Part 2: Latest work on stem-cell research or the nuclear arms race

Resource: biologist engaged in stem-cell research or Day After Trinity (film) about Robert Oppenheimer.

Questions

- Thinking about Frankenstein, does a scientist have to make big personal sacrifices before a scientific breakthrough can be realized?
- Is it possible to push the frontiers of science and at the same time honor human values?
- How should we think about a discovery that saves human lives but at the same time has the potential to be used inappropriately?
- Should there be limits on scientific inquiry? How should they be framed? How should they be monitored?

Week 4: Social Movements: An Appraisal

Part 1: Gandhi (the movie)

Questions

- To what extent did the movement (*Satyagraha*) arise from Gandhi and his teachings versus the underlying conditions (i.e., the time was ripe for change)?
- What were the sources of power used by Gandhi, and why were they effective?

Part 2: Examples of contemporary social movements

Resource: faculty member from Urban Studies

Questions

- Since the time of Gandhi, the US has witnessed several social movements, including the civil rights period of the 1960s, Occupy Wall Street, the Women's March on Washington and Black Lives Matter. How successful have these movements been in achieving their objectives?
- Is a charismatic leader necessary for a social movement to have sustainability as well as some measure of success?
- How should the social media be viewed with respect to social protest? And with respect to its influence on corporate responsibility?
- Under what circumstances, if any, should civil disobedience be part of the repertoire of a social movement?
- As a manager of an organization that has been targeted by a movement, how would you respond?

Week 5: Crime and Punishment

Part 1: Billy Budd by Herman Melville

Questions

- Does Capt. Vere have any options other than the course he followed?
- Do we agree with the premise advanced by Melville that pure good and pure evil cannot coexist?

Part 2: Readings on Restorative Justice

Resource: Law professor or police superintendent. Resource: TED talk by Byran Stevenson, founder of Equal Justice Initiative.

Questions

- What are the advantages/disadvantages of requiring mandatory sentence minimums for punishment? In the United States guilty of mass incarceration?
- Before any punishment is decided, what steps must the organization and the manager in charge take to fulfill the requirements of due process?
- Can punishment ever be creative and what are the advantages of restorative justice?

Week 6: The American Dream, Reconsidered

Part 1: *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller

Questions

- Will there always be Willie Lomans striving to be successful and especially to have their children be successful?
- Does Willie Loman have the wrong dream, or was he just unlucky?
- Does management (Howard) have some responsibility when a worker becomes “tired” due to age or illness?

Part 2: *The Market as God*, by Harvey Cox

Resource: Prof. Cox, Harvard University

Questions

- In the US, why is success so equated with financial well being?
- Is the capitalist system, with its emphasis on the market, responsible for our preoccupation with financial success?
- Is there a better system for providing goods and services than a market economy?