Moral Courage: Building Ethical Strength In the Workplace

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Ethics as a "Practice"

Michael Sloan; Christian Science Monitor, July, 2009
In 1949...business ethics in the U.S. had become so flexible that,

“Such is the brutalization of commercial ethics in this country that no one can feel anything more delicate than the velvet touch of a soft buck.”

Overview

• Background, goals, set up
• Experiential activity
• Application
Background

Positive Organizational Scholarship leverages the foundations of Positive Psychology to contribute to individual and collective flourishing in the workplace. This includes adult moral development via organizational ethics training.
Responsible Mining

- Equity
- Participatory Decision Making
- Accountability & Transparency
- Precaution & Safety
- Efficiency
- Polluter Responsibility
- Sustainable Development
Workshop Goals

1) Awareness of ethical strength
   ✓ Tone at the top, but also, from the edges and in the middle
   ✓ Compliance and ethics

2) Learn how to build an ethical culture
   ✓ Recognize espoused versus lived values
   ✓ Reflection and dialogue

3) Consider ethical performance
   ✓ If you want to build it, you need to develop it
   ✓ If you want to see it, you need to measure it
Key Terms

Ethics: *ethos* (Greek/customs)
- Philosophy of human conduct to determine right/wrong
- Involves the examination of principles/values, rules, and goals
  Thinking through your values

Morals: *mores* (Latin/customs)
- Codified principles/values that establish the boundaries of accepted “right” behavior
- May require the subordination of some values over others
- Calls upon the use of self-regulation
  Living the values you hold

Compliance: *comply* (Latin/fill up)
- Conformity in fulfilling official requirements
  Adherence to values expressed in regulation
Who are these people?

- They didn’t wake up one day and decide to be unethical. *What happened?*
- How can we support sustained ethical decision-making in the workplace?
- How can management cultivate an ethical culture?
Slippery Slope

- Group justifies actions.
- Rules are vague and/or changing.
- Those in charge seem just.
- Compassionate leader becomes dictatorial at times.
- Small steps of unethical acts, gradually increase in number and magnitude.
- Acts that legitimize the group are rewarded.
- Models comply with ideology.
- Exiting is difficult.
Question

Are you above average in ethical character?
Lake Wobegon Effect

...where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.

Caution: People are not as ethical as they assume.
Question???

What contributes to a person’s ability to respond to ethical challenges with moral strength?
Morality Needs Muscle

- Athletes can not compete without proper training!
- People are unlikely to engage in moral action without opportunities to build their moral muscles.
- This means creating processes that help us become aware of our ethical challenges and to understand what promotes/curtails our desire to proceed with moral action.

William James suggested that people need to “exercise” morality by applying themselves to unpleasant tasks.
Competency Approach

• More than personal traits, aggregates of capabilities that have enduring value and broad applicability.
• Underlying characteristics: a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one’s self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge, used to accomplish one’s job.
• Harmonized, intentional constructs that can be developed.
• Need to use moral competencies, to build them (moral muscle).
Think back to a time when you faced an ethical challenge at work.

An example might be a situation where there is a conflict between doing what you think you should do and what the organization, boss, or peer norms suggest. This might involve a conflict between your own values and the organization’s goals.

The situation may have made it difficult for you to act, to know what to do, or to determine how to resolve the issue. As you think back about your experiences that you have encountered while on the job, this is a time when you may have been unsure how to act or did not know what to do. The situation was likely undesirable, based upon the risks you perceived. The experience presented a moral issue and, at the time, none of the options seemed particularly favorable.

Please describe your scenario. Be sure to explain the scenario itself, what you did, what you were thinking and feeling at the time, and how you addressed the ethical challenge.
Step 1: Identify an ethical scenario (5 minutes)

Recall your ethical challenge…
• What was the *ethical issue*?
• What were you *thinking and feeling*?
• What supported (or curtailed) your *ability to respond* with moral action?
• What *did you do*?
Step 2: Examining strengths/barriers with a partner (15 minutes)

- Briefly share an overview of your story.
- What supported (or curtailed) your ability to respond with ethical action?
- What about the organization supported (or blocked) your ability to address this situation effectively?
Step 3: Report-outs and group discussion (15 minutes)

- What was your story? Thoughts and feelings?
- What supports or curtails your ethical action? What about the organization?
- How will you overcome these challenges?
- Given these challenges, how will you sustain your own moral strength, as a model for others?
## Ethical Challenges Faced by Middle Managers (N=35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types*</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rule bending to accomplish a task</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule bending to accommodate senior management</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate use of funds or missing funds/resources</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual activity</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheating/Lying</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment (not sexual)</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug or alcohol abuse</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payoffs, bribery, or inducements</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>
How do Moral Agents respond?

1) Initial sense of helplessness
2) Scared, angry, worried, anxious
3) Use self-regulation
4) Empathy (considers group, organization)
5) Get more information/ask questions, consult with trusted confidant
6) Reflection and sleeplessness
7) Take action
Professional Moral Courage (PMC)

Like emergency responders, moral agents make the decision to engage ‘before’ the situation emerges.

✓ Moral Goal (‘right’ motives)
✓ Applies Multiple Values
✓ Goes Beyond Compliance
✓ Endures Threat
✓ Moral Agency
PMC in Decision-making (N=123)

**High**
- Self-regulation
- Ethical achievement-oriented
- Seeks information/support
- Sees big picture
- Self efficacy
- Willing to take ‘unselfish’ risk

**Low**
- Discounting
- Compliance-focused
- Maintain status quo
- Assumes leader will manage
- Avoid rejection/blame
Self-regulation...of Desire

**Suspend some desires**
- Need to belong
- Avoid conflict/risk
- Protect record
- Finish task

**Bolster other desires**
- Concern/empathy for others
- Long-term interests
- Do the ‘right’ thing

Nast, 1871
Moral Competencies

✓ **Emotional Signaling:** Uses emotional cues to fuel moral awareness.

✓ **Reflective Pause:** Self-imposed time-out for insight and deliberation, regardless of time constraints.

✓ **Self-regulation:** Manage desires that may run counter to internal or external demands.

✓ **Moral Preparation:** Preconceived intention to act ethically, even before one faces an ethical challenge.
Ongoing Practice

• Dialogue
  ✓ Sharing ethical challenges, those relevant to employees and the organization
  ✓ Across roles/functions, ethics becomes a part of everyday discussions (in the context of completing tasks)

• Reflection
  ✓ Illuminate self-awareness and introspection, important for effective ethical decision-making (e.g., 360 degree feedback)

• Communication
  ✓ Create safe spaces for discussion (e.g., balanced experiential inquiry)

• Strategy
  ✓ Develop moral competencies in organizational ethics training
  ✓ Link them to performance objectives
## Ethics in the Workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unethical Action</th>
<th>Ethical Action</th>
<th>Ethical Strength</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does harm</td>
<td>Does no harm</td>
<td>Reduces harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-adherence to regulation</td>
<td>Adherence to regulation</td>
<td>Supersedes regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance orientation</td>
<td>Prevention orientation</td>
<td>Promotion orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment Disobedience and noncompliance</td>
<td>Control Obedience and compliance</td>
<td>Empowerment Growth and development</td>
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</tbody>
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← Closed/Control  Open/Discovery →

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Moral Weakness</th>
<th>Moral Minimum</th>
<th>Moral Fortitude</th>
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- Unethical Action: Does harm, Non-adherence to regulation, Avoidance orientation, Punishment Disobedience and noncompliance
- Ethical Action: Does no harm, Adherence to regulation, Prevention orientation, Control Obedience and compliance
- Ethical Strength: Reduces harm, Supersedes regulation, Promotion orientation, Empowerment Growth and development

Closed/Control: Moral Weakness → Open/Discovery: Moral Fortitude →
Revisiting our Goals

1) Awareness of ethical strength
   - Co-created across roles, functions, and levels
   - Ethics goes beyond compliance

2) Learn how to build an ethical culture
   - Balanced Experiential Inquiry

3) Consider ethical performance
   - Develop moral competencies
   - Measure and evaluate; include ethics in performance goals
Thank you

For those interested in..
Positive Organizational Ethics
contact me at:
lesekerk@gmail.com
or visit the Ethics in Action website:
http://www.sekerkaethicsinaction.com/
Pictured (left to right)

1. Rigas, Adelphia
2. Cunningham, CA govt
3. Everson, Red Cross
4. Spitzer, NY govt
5. Dixon, MD govt
6. Dunn, HP
7. Hu, Rio Tinto
8. Blagojevich, IL govt
9. Madoff, Financier
10. Murdoch, NewsCorp
11. Mozel, Countrywide Finance
12. Lay and Skilling, Enron
13. Druyun, Boeing
14. Heyer, Starwood Hotels & Resorts
15. Kiley, US govt
References


