

Strengthening professional moral courage: a balanced approach to ethics training

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Reframing the approach to ethics training

Sustaining ethical behaviour at work is essential for creating high-performing organizations. Yet given the persistence of ethical malfeasance in both corporate and government settings, many have questioned the effectiveness of current organizational ethics training programmes. We suggest a need to revisit both the process and content of these programmes, if there is a sincere interest in fostering ethical performance in the workplace.

First, from a process perspective, the predominant model for current ethics training programmes closely mirrors the coursework model used in formal, higher-educational settings. This model is highly content focused (i.e. learning specific ethical frameworks, theories and policies) and instructor-driven (i.e. content presented for students to memorize and master). Many of us recognize, however, that this model is not the most effective for working managers. From experiential-learning theory, we know that for adults to truly learn something (and be able to understand and apply the capability in daily action) they need to go through the experiential-learning cycle. This includes having a concrete experience, reflecting on that experience, conceptualizing abstractly about the experience and actively experimenting with new behaviours (Kolb, 1984). Additionally, if we apply the principles of adult-learning theory (Knowles, 1973; Merriam, 2001) to our design of ethics training, we should acknowledge and leverage the fact that our participants:

- have an independent self-concept and can direct their own learning;
- have accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that provide a rich resource for learning;
- have learning needs closely related to changing social roles;
- are problem-centred and interested in immediate application of knowledge; and
- are motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.

Next, from a content perspective, many current ethics training programmes focus largely on increasing employees' knowledge of their own level of ethical awareness or ethical philosophy (e.g. utilitarian, care, justice, etc.) as well as teaching implications for new rules (i.e. Sarbanes Oxley) and policy compliance. While such knowledge is important, it does little to actually cultivate an employee's ability to engage in moral decision-making and action in the workplace. It is not enough to know the rules, or what the options for action are, if a person is not willing to act on this awareness. It often takes moral courage for individuals to do what they know they should in the face of an ethical challenge.

Professional moral courage has been shown to be a critical link between awareness of a moral action and actually engaging in this behaviour (Sekerka *et al.*, 2009). This form of courage is an applied capability of ethical strength and has been described as having the intention to engage in moral action in the course of doing one's job. Demonstrating professional moral courage means that, despite the potential for adverse personal consequences (including negative emotions, risk, difficulty or threat to self) an employee displays fortitude to pursue a moral path when faced with a dilemma. The concept of professional moral courage invites us to re-conceptualize our approach as trainers of business ethics toward viewing morality as a muscle that can be exercised, trained and toned. This is in juxtaposition to the more simplistic binary focus of many ethics training programmes, which assume morality is a quality that a person does or does not have. From this vantage point, we can begin to create enhanced ethics training programmes that provide managers an opportunity to "work out" their moral muscles in support of building professional moral courage in organizational settings.

Research has shown that individuals who demonstrate this form of courage use several core skills when they are faced with an ethical challenge (Sekerka *et al.*, in press). We refer to these competencies as moral muscles. Competencies are underlying personal characteristics

that can result in effective and/or superior job performance (Klemp, 1980). Boyatzis (1982) describes job competencies as personal abilities that are related to specific actions (although they may not correlate one-to-one). In studying managers' responses to ethical challenges, Sekerka and her colleagues examined managers' actions and their perceived results and intent. Their analysis revealed four core competencies, which we refer to as moral muscles. These abilities contributed to the demonstration of actions that met the criteria for professional moral courage as outlined above. They include:

- *Emotional signalling.* An ability to recognize emotions and use them as signals for understanding oneself and the situation. Ethical challenges can elicit a range of emotions, felt or anticipated, from enthusiastic interest, to confusion, anger, guilt or fear. Emotions contain important signals that influence moral decision-making. Individuals who exercise emotional signalling use these emotions as cues to help them to proceed toward an effective moral decision and/or action.
- *Reflective pause.* An ability to suspend a reaction-based, quick response. Exercising a reflective pause involves using a purposive self-imposed time-out for insight and deliberation, regardless of time constraints. Those who respond to challenges with professional moral courage use this pause as an intentional strategy to slow things down, clear the mind, collect one's thoughts, generate options and get external input before making a decision.
- *Self-regulation.* An ability to manage one's desires, to restrain acting solely upon self-interest. When faced with an ethical dilemma, the desire may be to disengage or to gain personal advantage in some way. Managers need to discern whether to delay a response or to act quickly based on broader considerations (including what is best for others) and to honestly examine their motives. Initial reactions and visceral responses need to be made conscious and internally managed. This also means working to sustain the willingness to proceed with a moral action, even when those around (peers and leaders) do not necessarily provide affirmation or support for such action.
- *Moral preparation.* An ability to rehearse the process of moral decision-making on an ongoing basis to become ready for future intentional moral responses. Individuals who demonstrate professional moral courage use this muscle to internally reaffirm their desire to respond ethically when faced with a future ethical dilemma. This involves thinking about where ethical issues reside

in everyday activities, showing a capacity to continually think through how a situation might play out (given alternatives) considering in advance how to mitigate ethical failure and to actively pursue ethical strength.

Each of these muscles needs to be developed if we want employees to act in an ethical manner. Just as we would not expect a novice athlete to complete a marathon without proper training, we cannot expect managers to engage in moral action and demonstrate professional moral courage without opportunities to build their moral muscles. This means creating specific training opportunities for managers to exercise these muscles.

We offer an example of one such exercise, called balanced experiential inquiry (BEI), which is designed specifically to address adult-learning needs and provide employees with the opportunity to develop their ethical strength.

Using BEI to strengthen professional moral courage

The BEI process was developed by the first author and has been applied in a variety of organizations, predominantly with government employees and military-service personnel at the junior, middle and senior-management levels. It is a dedicated workshop session where individuals have the opportunity to exercise their moral muscles on real ethical challenges from their own workplace experiences.

The workshop aims to provide a holistic learning experience that brings balance to a variety of tensions employees face when dealing with ethical issues at work, including past positive and negative experiences with moral dilemmas. At its core, the workshop seeks to balance two core change-management techniques: diagnostic (deficit-based) and appreciative inquiry (strength-based). BEI invites the sharing of stories, elevating the positive while also honouring the negative aspects of their experiences, and thinking about factors that support and impede their ability to proceed with ethical action when faced with an ethical challenge. The process is balanced given it helps participants to cultivate strength from both the positive and negative aspects of their prior encounters with ethical dilemmas.

Although a trainer facilitates the process, BEI is not trainer-centred; rather, it focuses on identifying and using salient examples of participants' ethical challenges as the learning content. It is not a pre-packaged or lecture-based activity. While we outline the structure herein, it takes skill and preparation on the part of the facilitator to effectively lead a BEI workshop. Each BEI session is tailored to the

unique experiences of the participants. There are specific steps in the process, which are detailed below, but instructors must remain flexible, using situations relevant to the employees in their specific organizational setting, so the instructor must be ready to improvise depending on the situations raised by participants. When employees engage in a BEI session, they are guided to better understand professional moral courage and to practise the four moral muscles that help to facilitate it. Inquiry, reflection and dialogue are used to help employees to discover how they might engage in professional moral courage and to see how their efforts shape the ethical culture of their organization. Table 1 summarizes the steps for conducting a BEI session, as well as which moral muscle each step exercises and the adult-learning principles addressed. The steps are described in detail below.

Step 1: Identify an ethical scenario

At the outset of a BEI session, employees are asked to individually write down a brief description of an ethical challenge that they have faced in the workplace and what they were thinking and feeling at the time (similar to the critical-incident interview technique (Flanagan, 1982)). Participants are guided to consider situations that may have been

Table 1. BEI process as related to moral muscles and adult-learning principles

BEI step	Moral muscle exercised	Adult-learning principle considered	Phase in the experiential-learning cycle
1. Identify an ethical scenario	Moral preparation; reflective pause	Building on personal life experience; self-directed learning; internal motivation for learning	Concrete experience
2. Examine strengths and barriers with a partner	Emotional signaling; reflective pause; self-regulation	Problem-solving focus; building on personal life experience; immediate application of knowledge	Reflection and abstract conceptualization about experience
3. Report-outs and group discussion	Emotional signaling; reflective pause; self-regulation; moral preparation	Immediate application of knowledge; building on personal life experience; internal motivation for learning	Conceptualization about experience; experimentation with new behaviours

difficult (hard to act), problematic (uncertain), or set forth a dilemma (no one correct answer). The following instructions are read aloud:

Think back to a time when you faced an ethical challenge while 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 favourable.

The group is then given time to individually reflect, consider ideas and take notes about personal experiences with ethical challenges at work. Group members are asked to address the following questions during this period:

- (1) What was the ethical issue and what did you do?
- (2) What were you thinking and feeling at the time?

This step is used to help to develop the practice of moral preparation. Every session begins with the solicitation of ethical challenges that participants have encountered at work, prompting self-directed learning based upon life experience, a core tenet of adult-learning theory. Employees are asked to consider their past feelings, decisions and actions (or inaction). In so doing, they begin to discern their own capacity for moral agency. Situations often present conflicting or competing values and participants generally seek verification to establish what they should have done (i.e. what are the so-called "right" actions in this case?) While the facilitator works to validate and affirm their experiences, they remain non-judgmental about what is (or is not) an ethical challenge or what is (or is not) a "right" decision or response. The scenarios vary, but often include stories that involve rule-bending; stealing, lying and/or cheating; sexual activity; drug/alcohol problems; bribery/corruption; and harassment.

Regardless of whether the scenario resulted in a moral action, every case presents a learning opportunity to exercise one's moral muscles. Central to the muscle of moral preparation, Step 1 invites participants to consider, examine and begin to look honestly at their willingness to engage in moral action.

Step 2: Examining strengths and barriers with a partner

Participants are then asked to form pairs so they can share their story with a partner. This starts an ethics dialogue and encourages conversational learning among employees. As the group members work in their dyads, the facilitator visits each pair to see how they are doing and to determine some of the key issues for this organization. Supportive probes are provided to pairs less comfortable with this initial engagement, affirming their effort and helping them to launch their dialogue.

After the exchange of scenarios and experiences, the pair is asked to determine what supported (or curtailed) any ability to proceed with moral action in the reported circumstance. Participants are reminded that this may be an internal or external characteristic of their process or the situation itself. This step is designed to emphasize an action orientation, considering specifically what promotes or blocks one's willingness to proceed with moral action. Additional time is provided to address the following questions in the dyads:

- (1) What supported (or curtailed) your ability to respond with moral action?
- (2) What about the organization or management supported (or curtailed) your ability to address this situation effectively?

This step helps participants to exercise their moral muscles of reflective pause, emotional signalling and self-regulation. Additionally, it takes into consideration the adult-learning principle of focusing on real-life issues with a problem-solving approach.

Step 3: Report-outs and group discussion

This final step continues to elevate the experiential focus and conversational learning nature of the activity, bringing people together through collective story-telling about personal issues. The facilitator asks for volunteers to present situations in community (to the larger group). In describing their stories, participants connect to others, establishing shared value around the desire to "do the right thing". Most people have never discussed their ethical issues with anyone and, if they have, rarely with a group of organizational members. While everyone has an instinct to avoid public scrutiny, the desire to remain silent is often superseded by the opportunity to discover and learn.

Many people share because they seek affirmation for their actions, want ideas for solutions or consider their situation as a learning resource for the group. Rarely do participants present a scenario where they see themselves as moral exemplars. Rather, people often choose situations

that they view as unfinished episodes in their life (i.e. some aspect of the event or their response remains unresolved) or it is a situation that caught them off guard or surprised them. The choice to impose a self-directed time-out and consider their story before sharing it publicly exercises the moral muscle of reflective pause. Self-regulation also gets a workout as participants manage their feelings and desires, allowing themselves to become vulnerable to public examination for the sake of learning and development.

Participants tend to empathize with their colleagues as they report their issues, ask one another questions and determine organizational knowledge from their shared challenges. Often they collectively presuppose what they might do differently in the future, or even how they might change policies and practices to better support their ethical performance, which helps to strengthen their moral preparation. Barriers to moral action emerge over the course of the session, typically revealing how narrow self-focused concern is a deterrent for professional moral courage. Here, participants may begin to blame some person, place or thing that is out of their control (i.e. nothing they can say or do will make it “right”). When finger-pointing emerges in a group setting the group tends to self-affirm the need for personal responsibility. This can become an “ah ha” moment for participants when they see that ethics goes beyond organizational policy statements and practices. The reality is that moral preparation must be a part of their professional identity; each person is ultimately responsible, accountable for their actions and/or a lack of moral action.

As participants work together to deconstruct the situation and identify what promotes or curtails their willingness to engage in moral action, the facilitator tracks and diagrams this information on a whiteboard or flip-chart at the front of the room. Here the facilitator notes the specific situations deemed problematic, what emotions were experienced, what happened and where moral muscles were exercised (or could have been) in the specific encounter. Depending on the length of time allotted for the workshop (typically between two and three hours), three to four scenarios are examined with additional probes set forth during the exchange, such as:

- (1) How will you overcome these challenges?
- (2) How will you sustain your own ethical strength, as a model to others?

In addition to helping participants to exercise all of the moral muscles, this step also honours the adult-learning principles to allow immediate

application of knowledge to work-related issues they will undoubtedly face during their tenure on the job.

Lessons for facilitating learning in a self-directed environment

Although the process of BEI is self-directed and rooted in the content raised by participants, it is important to recognize that the facilitation is not passive. Rather, a BEI facilitator has an important and active role to play in the session while adhering to the principles of adult learning outlined above. For example, in some workshops members know one another; in others they do not. Therefore, to create a safe space the facilitator establishes an open dialogue, promoting ongoing reflective questions back to group members to let them review and deconstruct the scenario, potentially reframing but without imposing judgement. The process is not designed to determine what the “right” action should be, but how one learns to consciously manage emotions, thoughts, motives, evaluations and intentions in the decision to engage (or not engage) in moral action. In some cases, a decision to take no action may be an appropriate moral response.

The facilitator consistently guides the discussion, elevating the positive aspects of the stories and helps to establish trust for openness as participants engage in reflection and dialogue. In so doing, the facilitator becomes a pseudo-role model for practising the BEI process by demonstrating how to share insights, pose concerns and challenge employee peers to examine situations in varying ways. In this way, participants begin to practise a more open and supportive environment about how to address ethical issues in community, as they develop a shared sense of ownership for the process.

The facilitator should “check in” with each participant, ensuring that he or she has discussion time, if so desired. Without pressure to share, each person should be encouraged to participate in some fashion. Equity is established by having everyone engage in some way. For example, if a participant remains aloof, quiet or removed, the facilitator can make a gesture to include him or her by simply asking his or her opinion on a matter or inviting involvement in procedural duties without inducing pressure.

Throughout the process, the facilitator prompts group members to examine both their moral strengths and weaknesses by continually pointing out what moral muscles were demonstrated in the story being shared, how and when they are being used in the session and how ethical challenges serve as a platform to strengthen them in the future.

As employees openly describe their issues to others, they begin to experience a sense of vulnerability. The process can be anxiety-provoking as people become open to criticism in front of others and the tensions originally present in the circumstance are recalled and potentially exacerbated. As the conversation unfolds, increased stress in the room is likely, as decisions and actions are challenged. This can emerge as nervousness or even anger. Again, such negative emotions are similar to what is experienced at the onset of facing an ethical challenge. In response to the creation of some anxiety, it is the role of the facilitator to continually remind participants that they are now actually practising what it feels like to engage in professional moral courage, assuring them that this is an appropriate, managed and safe process. It is essential that the facilitator supports the group in this effort, affirming that BEI as a process invites emotional signalling and self-regulation in a group context, which is key for moral preparation. The BEI process requires both the facilitator and participants to manage their thoughts and feelings in the moment.

After conducting several workshops, facilitators build a repertoire of stories. Anonymous vignettes from other sessions can be used to: highlight any missing points (e.g. ensuring emphasis on self-regulation); alleviate tension in the room by generating humour from external examples; and emphasize how workshop take-aways can be used for personal and organizational improvement. The notion of personal responsibility is underscored throughout the process and employees leave with an experience that affirms how moral muscles need exercise to be strengthened.

Impact of BEI

Unlike traditional ethics training programs that use generic or third-party cases for discussion, BEI uses personal stories from participants. While it starts with individual reflection on past experiences, the process immediately engages participants in collective reflection and dialogue, which helps to create an atmosphere for conversational learning through informed group discussion. Such an environment allows for both individual reflection and collective meaning-making, which are important elements in the learning cycle. Finally, BEI also invites participants to seek balance between their individual conscience (what they think is "right") and collective peer pressure from the group reaction and dialogue.

Looking at pre-post tests (Sekerka, 2008), work to understand the impact of BEI shows that managers who participate experience increased interest in engaging in ethical decision-making and decreased

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negative emotions as they consider engaging in future moral action. Engagement in BEI also shows a lower need for praise when deciding to engage in a moral action. These findings, coupled with anecdotal feedback from participants, illustrate that the use of BEI does address the needs of adult learners while working to build their moral muscles, thus helping to increase the capacity for professional moral courage in the workplace.

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Points for thought

- Application of Balanced Experiential Inquiry to enhance ethics training provides managers with an opportunity to actively practise use of their moral muscles that support professional moral courage.
- Unlike traditional ethics training programmes that use generic or third-party cases, Balanced Experiential Inquiry uses employees' personal stories. This helps to establish saliency of ethical issues for participants.
- Unlike change processes that tend to focus on either the positive or negative aspects of workplace experiences to establish a platform for learning and development, the Balanced Experiential Inquiry process helps participants to create the impetus for change from both.
- Participation in a Balanced Experiential Inquiry workshop has been shown to establish positive impacts on a variety of factors related to effective ethical decision-making.

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