

## *Fostering Moral Imagination in Leadership Students*

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### **Introduction**

Moral imagination is described as the ability to challenge operative mental models in order to discover new ways of framing ethical problems and providing resolutions (Werhane, 1999). This presentation provides preliminary results of a non-experimental longitudinal study of moral imagination in students enrolled in Gonzaga University's Master of Organizational Leadership Program. This practice session will explain leadership ethics curriculum grounded in the construct of moral imagination. The educational curriculum is divided in four modules, with each module presenting opportunities for dialogue, practice, and writing. Modules are devoted to (1) introspective reflection on worldviews and responses to ethical dilemma, (2) identifying personal values and appreciating diversity, (3) discovering a common ground and developing community, and (4) morality in the organizational setting and solving ethical dilemmas. Participants in this session will depart with tools for each module and an action plan for implementation.

### **Background of Moral Imagination**

Though moral imagination is not a new philosophical concept, it has been the subject of renewed scholarly interest as philosophers and organizational theorists alike have looked at moral imagination in leaders. Werhane's (1999) groundbreaking research on moral imagination explored why ordinarily decent managers and or reputable companies get in [ethical] trouble and why they occasionally repeat past mistakes. Werhane found that some of the rationale is rooted in the fact that individuals form narrow mental models in how they view the world. These models are usually unconscious and implicit; both individuals and organizations make poor decisions by not consciously identifying the limitations of existing mental models. Moral imagination, on the other hand, is the ability to challenge mental models in order to reframe ethical problems and discover new solutions. It is the capacity to imagine something new that diverges from existing ways of thinking and operating.

Moral imagination as an ethical decision-making construct provides a compelling foundation for the ethical training required for leaders. Typically, ethical training has focused on teaching a range of moral theories such as utilitarian, rule based, rights approach, and social contract theory. Knowledge of these theories, however, does not ensure ethical action. Solberg, Strong, and McGuire (1995) explain the need for new ethical training that moves beyond simply being exposed to various ethical theories: "[training] must provide a rigorous and well-developed system in which students can 'live ethics' instead of merely learn ethics. A system must be devised to allow students to discover and refine their own values rather than simply learning ethical theories from an intellectual point of view" (p. 71). Training in moral imagination allows students to go beyond applying moral theories and, instead, focus on the both the limitations in their own thinking *and* the capacity for imagining new solutions when encountering ethical problems.

It is pertinent to explore and study the role of ethics and moral imagination in leadership as evidence continues to show that morality of leaders influence judgments, responses to colleagues, and commitments to personal and organizational goals (Trevino et al., 2000; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Organizational values promoted by ethical leadership serve as a credible compass to inform decision-making and empower employees as they encounter ethical problems and dilemmas. Developing moral imagination also requires re-conceptualizing and applying ethical theory and leadership practice with curriculum that does not merely attach ethics as a mere appendage to leadership development, but with critical thinking content and practice opportunities that become the very essence of leadership.

### **Leadership Ethics Curriculum**

Yurtsever (2006) rigorously reviewed numerous definitions of moral imagination and by highlighting Werhane's (1989) definition that integrates thoughts from Adam Smith, Kant, Kekes, and Johnson developed a three-stage process of approaching moral decisions. These three steps require (1) reproductive imagination, (2) productive imagination, and (3) creative imagination. This leadership ethics course integrates curriculum designed to contribute to developing moral imagination. The course is divided into modules that focus on a specific competency tied to various steps of moral imagination.

#### **Module One**

The most immediate skill students develop in the beginning module is to explore and identify their worldview and develop an appreciation for diverse worldviews. Students in leadership studies need the capacity to identify who they are before they can act or identify ethical behavior in leadership and organizations. Students have the opportunity to explore their lifespan development and identify how situations, circumstances, culture, family, and other influential milestones have impacted development of their worldview. Students learn skills to identify their responses to ethical problems. The course is designed to help students monitor their growth and progress in transitioning from expressive responses to responses grounded in philosophical thought. A goal of this course is to achieve a balance in philosophical thought, introspection, and contemplation to help students organize their future responses to ethical problems. In addition, students learn to focus on the values of constituents, appreciate their diversity, and learn to balance personal virtues with values of constituents.

#### **Module Two**

The competencies of module two focus on building the capacity to identify personal values and virtues that inform leadership and conduct within the organizational setting. Module video clips present content of how life experiences impacted the worldviews of C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud. Online blackboard discussions allow opportunity for self-reflection and discussion of personal wavering and/or constant worldviews. Course readings complement dialogue and charter a path for self-reflection and appreciation for constituents and their diversity. The goal is for students to gain the competency in balancing personal virtues with values of constituents and allow that symbiotic relationship to inform leadership practice. Video

clips describing life events that impacted Lewis and Freud serve as a case study example for student to introspectively reflect and discuss events that have confirmed or changed their worldview.

### **Module Three**

This third module provides opportunities to reflect upon relationships within the organization and how they inform leadership and conduct within the organizational setting. Students gain the capacity to identify how personal worldviews impact or dictate professional relationships, recognize development of personal attitudes and behaviors, identify the impact of personal views on forgiveness, and develop a strategy to create a sense of community in organizational settings. Module video clips provide a contextual background for online blackboard discussions in context relating to the influence that worldviews have on organizational behavior and perception of colleagues. Course readings introduce students to methods of affirming shared values and developing organizational reconciliation.

### **Module Four**

The concluding module provides opportunities for students to reflect upon morality in the organizational setting and practice techniques for solving ethical dilemmas. Students learn to identify and articulate personal views on “moral law” or professional ethics in organizational settings. By identifying moral and professional codes and recognizing how worldviews influence interpretation of organizational problems, students learn to develop a strategy to solve ethical problems and recommend a course of action. Module video clips encourage dialogue on the significance of morality and ethical standards in organizations and the impact of worldviews on interpreting ethical problems. Course readings introduce Coopers (1998) ethical decision-making model to equip students with techniques in identifying and resolving ethical dilemmas.

### **Conclusion**

This leadership ethics course provides opportunities for students to learn to identify and describe their worldview and identify how their background constructed their personal and professional character. Students introspectively analyze and increase their awareness of responses to ethical problems. This basic understanding contributes to identifying personal values and developed appreciation for the diverse values of constituents to achieve a symbiotic balance between personal virtues and constituent values. Leadership students complete this course having struggled through ethical cathartic moments, having gained introspective insight into their own worldview and the worldviews of those around them, and having gained strategies to solve ethical dilemmas while proactively developing ethical leadership in their organizational setting. Session participants will leave with several tools that contribute to development of moral imagination.

### **References**

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