



NAVAL
POSTGRADUATE
SCHOOL

MORAL ACTION IN EVERYDAY LIFE:

*An Ethics Process to Foster Interest &
Determination in the Workplace*

Business Ethics in a Global World: China, India, and Beyond
Santa Clara University - March 10, 2006

~

Leslie E. Sekerka, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Organizational Behavior & Ethics
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA

Ethics in Daily Tasks

- Complex ethical challenges
- “Beyond compliance” has become more compliance
- Expectation of social responsibility/external stakeholders
- Rule accretion and bureaucracy
- Pressure to perform/global marketplace
- Competing values
- Cross cultural uncertainties
- Ethical norms are not reliable



What we don't know, can hurt us.

Ethics Programs: Control Unethical Behavior

- The “ultimate goal of ethics training is to teach decision-making to individuals so that they might develop skills that will help them avoid unethical behaviors that can lead to a negative reputation for the company.” (Harrington, 1991)
- Response to concerns of unethical behavior in the workplace—provide a diverse set of ethics programs. (Weaver, 1999)

Where's the target?

Moral Strength

Instill moral good/ reduce harms
Achievement, values-based, virtuous

Ethical Minimum

Do no harm/adhere to legal baseline
Obedience and rules-based
Compliance pass/fail

Ethical Mediocrity

Weakness of ethical/moral action
Unethical behavior



Research Questions

- How can *Positive Organizational Scholarship* (POS) enhance traditional ethics frameworks?
- How can change management techniques be used to support a proactive approach?
- How can we help prepare individuals to address ethical challenges in the workplace?

Insight from Prior Research

■ **Inquiry focus** (Cooperrider, 2002)

The questions we ask are fateful...they steer the direction for discovery.

■ **Seek out information** (Armenakis, 2002)

Decision-making process is faulty when employees roll up, abbreviate, simplify, and suppress information, rather than choosing to probe, explore, and expand it.

■ **Desire to engage in moral action** (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007)

...is influenced by personal factors, impacted by social forces such as org directives, social norms, perceived rewards or punishments, social pressure, and other situational and contextual factors.

■ **Sustained involvement** (Fombrun & Foss, 2004)

Ethical decision-making is a process that involves continuous soul searching and the reconciliation of competing values.

The Study

- **Inquiry focus:** Achievement of **moral action**
(vs. avoidance of unethical action)
- **Information seeking:** Interest & determination primed via **curiosity**
- **Desire to engage:** Internal (self) and external (others) **moral approbation**
- **Sustained involvement:** Get **ethics inquiry** and dialogue going in the workplace

General Definitions

- **Curiosity**: A positive emotional-motivational process that is a self-directed choice to become interested and engaged, reflecting the determination to proceed with a pursuit to gather more information. (Kashdan & Fincham, 2004)
- **Moral Approbation**: A need to draw upon evaluations from self and others as person make choices to proceed with moral action. (Ryan & Ciavarella, 2000)

Change Management Techniques

■ Diagnostic Inquiry

- What are the weaknesses?
- What is wrong, broken, or dysfunctional?
- What problems need fixing?

■ Strength-based Inquiry

- What are the strengths?
- What works well, is a best practice?
- How can we build capacity?
- What areas of strength can be developed?



Balanced Experiential Inquiry (BEI)

1. What was your ethical challenge?
2. What were you thinking and feeling?
3. What supported or curtailed your ability to proceed with moral action?
4. What about the organization supported or curtailed your decision to proceed with moral action?

Hypotheses

Leader-managers in hierarchical organizations who engage in BEI will experience:

HY1: Increased curiosity.

HY2a: Increased influence in positive evaluations from self in moral decision-making;

2b: Decreased influence in positive evaluations from others in moral decision-making;

2c: No change in negative evaluations from others in moral decision-making.

HY3a: No change in positive emotions;

3b: Decreased negative emotions.

Methods & Findings

Pre/Post field study with military officers in the U. S. Navy (N=169). Groups of 12-15 people engaged in a 1-hour introductory BEI session. Established scales used to measure curiosity, DMA, and emotions before and after participation.

HY1: Curiosity increased (supported)

HY2a: DMA-self no change (not supported)

2b: DMA-others/praise increased (supported)

2c: DMA-others/blame no change (supported)

HY3a: Positive emotions no change (supported)

3b: Negative emotions decreased (supported)

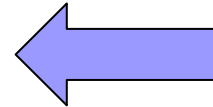
Implications of Participation

- Prompts moral reflection, awareness, and dialogue, helps people prepare to recognize and address ethical challenges;
- Interest and determination, promotes self-directed engagement that can contribute to informed moral judgment;
- Desire for external praise reduced, valuable for sustained progression toward moral action;
- Lack of impact to positive evaluations from self requires further attention.

Dual Achievement Goals (Sekerka, working paper)

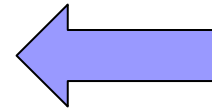
Moral Action Goal:

- Assume personal risk
- Self-efficacy**
- Self-interests set aside
- Probes, asks questions
- Sees big picture



Performance Goal:

- Avoid blame**
- Avoid rejection
- Compliance
- Discounting issues
- Maintain status quo



Limitations & Future Research

- Field study, no control group;
- Short-term implications;
- Conduct research using BEI or other interventions incorporated into workplace routines over time;
- Additional research on moral performance (e.g., metrics that address moral decision-making and action in all performance objectives).*

*If prevention orientation remains the org ethics framework, norms will unlikely be impacted, and internal evaluations in moral decision-making will unlikely be changed.

Ethical & Moral Leadership



(MSNBC TV, Lt. Gen Kevin Kiley during
Walter-Reed Fallout, 2/26/07)

We are reminded that leaders are responsible for everything that happens—or fails to happen.