

ETHICAL MATURITY AND SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT: Ethical maturity is the ability not only to judge right from wrong, but to make the right choice when issues in conflict require the individual to weight competing values when making sociotechnical decisions. While a universal metric for describing ethical maturity does not exist, scales of professional moral development based on the work of Kohlberg are useful for analyzing subordinates' ethical maturity. To be professionally successful, leaders must themselves be ethically mature, and they must seek to increase their subordinates' ethical maturity. Mentoring on ethical issues is discussed, including specific programs that leaders can use to achieve moral maturity within their company.

INTRODUCTION

In his autobiography, former president Richard M. Nixon stated

What happened in Watergate—the facts, not the myths—was wrong. In retrospect, while I was not involved in the decision to conduct the break-in, I should have set a higher standard for the conduct of the people who participated in my campaign and Administration. I should have made such actions unthinkable. I did not. ("Richard Nixon" 1990).

President Nixon's reflective analysis of his past suggests a maturing of his attitude toward the importance of value criteria as an element of leadership. Prior to Watergate, he had not recognized the importance of either the value dimension of his policies or the value sensitivity of his subordinates. As with most individuals, reflecting on mistakes can lead to the development of a more mature attitude and a greater recognition of the importance of value issues in decision making and leadership. A mentor can play a valuable role by assisting a wrongdoer in reflecting on past unprincipled conduct. President Nixon's case is, unfortunately, one of the more significant illustrations of the relationship between ethical maturity and successful leadership. His pre-Watergate level of ethical maturity contributed to his failure to establish a moral tone for his subordinates to follow, with the result that his failure in moral leadership now serves as a defining symbol of his professional life.

Ethical maturity is a necessary characteristic for one to be a truly successful leader. It is important to present the concept of ethical maturity in the context of engineering leadership and suggest ways that individuals can systematically advance in the ethical dimension of their professional life as well as set a leadership example for subordinates. As suggested by the example of Nixon's Administration, a leader who lacks ethical maturity may have to bear the responsibility for failure of an organization. Furthermore, the leader must specifically discuss ethical matters with subordinates to ensure that their ethical maturity is sufficient to meet the value demands of their positions.

ETHICAL MATURITY

The word *maturity* is a frequent description of one's perceived abilities (e.g., social poise, athletic ability, etc.) when

compared with other individuals of the same age. It is often applied to measure either a toddler's behavior or a teen's level of social skills. The statement, "He/she is mature for his/her age," generally reflects the child or teen's ability to interact with other people.

Maturity has many dimensions when it is applied to the capacity of a professional engineer to make value decisions. With respect to the general topic of professionalism, a professional's level of ethical maturity is of primary interest. Ethical maturity is the aspect of professionalism that corresponds to the moral maturity in an individual's personal life.

Maturity is the condition of being fully developed in a specific capacity. The growth to maturity is a process rather than a dichotomous classification. Typically, we describe an adult acting childishly as immature. Conversely, a child acting as an adult may be considered very mature for his or her age. Maturing is the progression from lower stages to higher stages, where the latter are considered to be representative of a greater ability to properly deal with associated issues.

The ethical maturity of a professional is important because it reflects how the individual approaches a dilemma that deals with values (e.g., truth versus loyalty). A professional has value obligations to many, including the firm, the client, the profession, and society, as well as to himself or herself. An ethically mature person recognizes the importance of these value obligations and must properly weigh each of them in solving a dilemma of conflicting values. A professional who only recognizes the ethical obligations to himself or herself or gives more weight to these obligations at the expense of other value obligations is considered ethically immature. An individual demonstrates ethical maturity only after he or she is able to weigh value decisions without bias.

ELEMENTS OF LEADERSHIP

One important aspect of leadership is the selection of subordinates. In talking about the mistakes that he made in hiring, W. Michael Blumenthal, former chairman of Unisys, stated

In choosing people for top positions, you have to try to make sure they have a clear sense of what is right and wrong, a willingness to be truthful, the courage to say what they think and to do what they think is right, even if the politics militate against that. This is the quality that should really be at the top.

I was too often impressed by the intelligence and substantive knowledge of an individual and did not always pay enough attention to the question of how honest, courageous, and good a person the individual really was.

While Blumenthal probably assessed and ranked the intelligence and knowledge of hiring candidates, he retrospectively recognized the importance of categorizing the candidates' ethical maturity, i.e., his or her value knowledge and decision-making skills. Ideally, this would require a scale, whether sub-

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TABLE 1. Stages of Moral Development in Selected Models

STAGE	KOHLBERG (Rules Ranked by Importance)	GILLIAM (Context Oriented Reasoning)	STAGE	MC CUEN (Professional Stages for Engineers)
PRE-CONVENTIONAL		PRE-CONVENTIONAL	PRE-PROFESSIONAL	
1	Obedience – Avoid Punishment	Self-Centered What's in it for me?	1	Conduct dictated by what it gains the individual.
2	Marketplace Morality Maximum Pleasure – Minimum Pain		2	Behavior motivated by self-advance—marketability
CONVENTIONAL		CONVENTIONAL	PROFESSIONAL	
3	Conforming to group norms	Not hurting others Sacrificing one's own interest to nurture others	3	Loyalty to the firm
4	Focus on law and order		4	Loyalty to the profession
--- Most Adults Stop Here ---				
POST-CONVENTIONAL		POST-CONVENTIONAL	PRINCIPLED PROFESSIONAL	
5	Principled Morality – Autonomous and Responsible (Think for themselves)	Balance of own needs and needs of others	5	Service to society
6	Universal morality Follow the Principle – Not the Law		6	Professional conduct dictated by universal rules of justice, fairness, caring for humans and nature
7	Shea (1988) Integrity – Thought and Feeling			

jective or objective in form, to serve as a metric for ethical maturity. The metric would enable ethical maturity to be more formally considered in hiring decisions.

In addition to hiring of subordinates, leaders have other important responsibilities that have implications to the ethical dimension of leadership. Mintzberg (1980) identified ten managerial responsibilities of a leader, separating the ten into three roles: interpersonal (figurehead, leader, liaison), informational (monitor, disseminator, spokesperson); and decisional (entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, negotiator). Each of these responsibilities requires ethical maturity, and the mature leader will meet all of Mintzberg's responsibilities all of the time. For example, as a representative of an organization, the leader performs tasks that promote the interests of the company. This would include giving speeches, representing the company in cultural activities, meeting with clients, and actively promoting the profession. The extent of the individual's ethical maturity will be reflected in his public pronouncements and actions. A lack of value maturity can limit the success of the company in getting work and influencing public policy.

Where individuals or subdivision of a company experience conflict over personal or professional matters, the leader must resolve the issue. While some of these conflicts are over resource allocation or technical issues, almost all difficult conflicts involve value issues. Proper resolution of such conflicts will, therefore, depend on the ethical maturity of the leader.

MEASURING ETHICAL MATURITY

While we establish subjective standards of behavioral maturity for children and of social maturity for teens, these are rather abstract metrics. An ideal standard would suggest that ethical maturity in a professional context could be systematically assessed and categorized. Such a system would help leaders of engineering organizations to focus on the value dimensions of their subordinates and even make managerial assignments based on their assessment of their subordinate's eth-

ical maturity. One subordinate may be passed over for an assignment that will involve important competing value issues if the leader considers the individual to be lacking in the ethical dimension of professionalism. This would be just as responsible a decision as passing over a person who lacks the technical knowledge. Such leadership decisions can have positive consequences with respect to organizational success and the extent to which the organization contributes to social welfare.

Scale of Professional Moral Development

While an individual's position on the ethical spectrum may be a result of a choice for adherence to a particular definition of ethics, it may also be in relation to the individual's level of moral development. The study of moral development is relatively young, having received emphasis that has increased since about the mid-1970s. In his studies of children, Kohlberg (1973, 1976) defined three levels of moral development. His first level, the Pre-Conventional, classified behavior as "to benefit oneself where the individual is motivated to avoid punishment or to satisfy his/her own needs." In the second, or Conventional, level, identified by the norms of the family, the group, or society, which becomes standard, "the individual has a desire to please others, and loyalty to others is important." According to Kohlberg, most adults never get beyond this stage. The third stage, Post-Conventional behavior, is based on right and wrong, where social interest is not sacrificed to the interests of the individual. Autonomous thinkers seek to live by "The Golden Rule."

One of Kohlberg's students, Gilliam (1993), indicated that Kohlberg's analysis had a male bias. She indicated that males resolved dilemmas on the basis of the most important moral rule, indicating an ethics of rules, whereas females focus on preserving personal relationships or an ethics of care. This discussion is interesting because it brings about the concept of individual style that may affect how individuals solve dilemmas. We will discuss this in more detail shortly. McCuen

(1979) further advanced the work of Kohlberg by applying these levels of moral development to the engineering profession. Each of these three researchers' interpretations of moral development is shown on Table 1 for comparison.

In addition to a concept of an individual's level of moral development, recognition of the concept of role morality is also a factor. For instance, parents of children have a different role to play than those individuals who do not have children. An employer may have a different role to play than an employee of a firm. One should not display different ethical behavior that is situational on the basis of a role. The ethical person should apply the same principles in all situations. Behavior reflects an individual's level of moral development.

Another issue that appears as a condition of moral development and is becoming increasingly important in professional practice is that of culture and the globalization of our markets. Many American businesspersons are troubled by the business practices of those in some foreign countries, only to find that such business practices are considered standard and, in fact, ethical behavior for that particular culture. It is clear that this particular aspect of culture, as our markets become more global, will become a more significant part of defining ethical maturity and the trust that is necessary in partnerships to achieve successful projects throughout the world.

ASSISTING SUBORDINATES TO ACHIEVE ETHICAL MATURITY

As former President Nixon suggested, part of his failure was the result of not ensuring that his subordinates achieved ethical maturity. While we can only speculate on the path that our nation would have taken had Watergate not taken place, we have to acknowledge that it had a very negative effect on our nation's history. One possible lesson that individuals can take away from Watergate is the need for leaders to ensure that their subordinates achieve the level of ethical maturity necessary to meet the value demands associated with their professional responsibilities.

Books on professional success and leadership that find their way to the best-seller lists typically stress the importance of mentoring. To the young person, the authors extol the importance of having a mentor. To the individual in a position of being a leader, the books identify mentoring as a primary responsibility. Blumenthal's perspective would suggest that value development is a primary responsibility of good mentoring.

Using the ethical dimension suggested by the Kohlberg-Gilliam-McCuen framework, the responsibility of a mentor would be to assist subordinates in moving from lower to higher stages of ethical development. The subordinate should mature from a loyalty-to-the-firm orientation to one of the service to society. Activities that a leader can take to help subordinates achieve ethical maturity include the following:

1. The mentor can begin by discussing appropriate sections of a professional code of ethics with the subordinate. First, the mentor must help the subordinate to recognize the value basis of the code; this can involve listing the values, defining each, and relating each value to the responsibilities of a professional. Second, the mentor should identify the types of value decisions that arise in professional practice. Relating these back to the code of ethics and forward to situations in which the subordinate will experience value conflicts is important to ensure that the subordinate recognizes the realism of the code. Finally, the mentor must demonstrate in his or her own actions that codes of ethics should be strictly adhered to. As Peters and Waterman (1982) state in their bestselling tome, *In Search of Excellence*, "Every excellent com-

pany we studied is clear on what it stands for, and takes the process of value shaping seriously." A subordinate who observes the company's leadership violating the spirit of the code of ethics learns that the company doesn't take values seriously.

2. Much of a professional's daily activities are devoted to the technical and business aspects of practice. Thus, entry-level professionals might begin to believe that these are the only important elements of professional practice. It is the mentor's responsibility to ensure that the subordinate recognizes the value issues inherent in each project and the way that the value issues influence the technical and business aspects. A major factor in professional licensure violations is inadequate supervision of a subordinate. While most of these cases might be related to technical matters, proper supervision of ethical matters is just as important. Good mentoring involves evaluating a subordinate's value decisions and discussing such decisions with the subordinate. The underlying values should be identified, the array of value responsibilities (self, firm, client, profession, and society) specified, and the need to balance competing values understood. These are important elements of value decision making, and failure in any one of the elements can result in failure to achieve ethical maturity.
3. The interpretation of maintaining professional competency should not be limited to technical aspects of professional life. It is just as important to develop and maintain competency in the ethical aspects of professional practice as it is in the technical aspects. Mentors need to encourage their subordinates to participate in professional activities that have a value orientation. This can range from professional talks on ethics to community-related activities that could lead to recognition of the impact of the engineering profession on society. K-12 activities during National Engineers Week would be one example of the latter. Mentors can recommend to subordinates readings related to values, ethics, and the interaction between society and the engineering profession. Broadening the subordinate's perspective on professional life is necessary for advancing his or her level of ethical maturity.
4. If the company regularly hires several entry-level professionals, the company should consider developing a professional ethics training (PET) program. For smaller companies, they should consider collaborating with other similar-sized firms in a PET program. Kucner (1993) discusses the implementation of a PET program. Such a program can be a critical factor in the ethical maturation of a young professional.

CONCLUSIONS

When a company hires a new employee or promotes an individual from within to a position of leadership, the officers of the company consider many factors. Many companies approach hiring much as do Nixon and Blumenthal, with less regard to honesty than to other value-insensitive qualities; however, they need to take the advice of Nixon and Blumenthal and give greater consideration to human value criteria. Ideally, the individual should be competent in all ten of Mintzberg's leadership responsibilities. Each of these have underpinnings for values and ethical behavior, even though conduct is not explicitly identified. Values and ethical behavior are generally not explicitly identified as decision criterion, but they should be.

Honesty and the ability to make value decisions are not you-either-have-it-or-you-don't qualities. This makes hiring and promotion based partly on value sensitivity a much more dif-

ficult decision. Leadership requires that, in addition to meeting the technical responsibilities of a position, we must also seek a higher level of ethical maturity to practice successful leadership. A precise metric to establish one's level or ethical maturity may not be realistic. However, it is clear that individuals and companies who recognize and practice at a higher level of ethical maturity are enhancing not only their success, but the profession as well.

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