Purpose
Managers’ willingness to proceed with right action can be diminished by the need for approval and feeling the negative emotions that often accompany ethical challenges. We describe *Balanced Experiential Inquiry* (BEI), a learning activity designed to help managers develop sustained moral performance.

Design/methodology/approach
Using their past experiences for reflective learning, managers engage in BEI to understand what promotes and curtails their ability to respond to ethical issues.

Findings
A field study showed that managers engaging in BEI perceived less need for praise from others and experienced a reduction in negative emotions.

Research limitations/implications
Future research evaluating BEI should use a control group, diverse sample, and a longitudinal design that tracks outcomes over time.

Practical implications
Application of BEI is a promising mechanism to help organizations bolster managers’ internal desires to stay on an ethical decision-making path.

Originality/value
Shared reflection and dialogue are needed to help foster responsibility and build ethical strength in organizational settings.

Key words: Business ethics, desired moral approbation, ethical decision-making, experiential learning, management ethics education and training

Use of Balanced Experiential Inquiry to Build Ethical Strength in the Workplace

The voluntary doing of what is wrong may result from either ignorance of what is right or from an unwillingness to do what is right.

—S. Browne, 1945

Organizations have many tools aimed at fostering ethical decision-making in the workplace. These approaches, however, often assume that people can maintain a *desire* to engage in ethical[1] action. Current efforts to promote workplace ethics pay little heed to developing employees' abilities to sustain moral commitment in the path to achieving right action. The increasing external pressures for managerial performance are compounded by internal negative emotions that often emerge when managers are confronted with an ethical challenge. Since such influences deleteriously impact ethical decision-making processes, managers must not only learn how to choose an ethical path, but also cultivate the desire to proceed with right action. This often requires focused efforts to build moral competencies through which ethical responses are executed (Sekerka, 2010).

To help organizations foster sustained moral performance, we describe a process called *Balanced Experiential Inquiry* (BEI), which has been designed to support fortitude in ethical decision-making. We begin with a brief overview of ethical performance, focusing on how emotions, self-regulation, and self-efficacy influence the desire to act ethically. We then detail how BEI draws from experiential learning to address the needs of adult learners. Findings from a field study show how participation in BEI can reduce negative emotions and thereby help support the desire to proceed with ethical action. We

[1] The terms ethical and moral are used interchangeably herein, referring to thoughts and actions that adhere to laws and policies, while taking into consideration others' needs and interests.

conclude with the implications of our work for managers who want to sustain the ethical health of their organizations.

Ethical Performance

Most ethics education programs do not frame ethics as a choice for action (Kidder, 2005). Rather, the focus has been on compliance with formal regulations. Such regulatory controls and their enforcement do little to develop an employee's desire to act ethically. In fact, regulations may impede ethical behavior because of a perceived need to rule-bend to achieve timely task completion (Sekerka and Zolin, 2007). Threats, punishment, and surveillance, typically at the core of control functions, can also undermine ethical performance. These pressures interfere with managers' internal control and "tend to result in extrinsic motivation or task disengagement, both of which have adverse effects on performance-related outcomes" (Kashdan and Fincham, 2004, p. 484). Prior research suggests that an ability to control one's own outcomes (Rotter, 1966), directly affects moral decision-making (Treviño and Youngblood, 1990), and may influence ethical behavior (Granitz, 2003). Thus, it is useful for organizations to promote managers' internal locus of control (Ryan, 1982; Ashkanasy, *et al*., 2006).

According to Rest's moral decision-making model (1986), as a person proceeds toward moral action, they must move from the desire to act to the decision to act. As people choose to act (or not), they frequently consider evaluations from themselves and others. The amount of external approval people need can influence their desire to act (Jones and Ryan, 1997; Ryan and Riordan, 2000). Referred to as *desired moral approbation* (DMA), such considerations are particularly influential in social contexts such as workplace environments, as DMA impacts peoples' decision-making trajectories

(Ryan and Ciavarella, 2000). The ability to proceed without external praise, or despite criticism, is an important factor in building efficacy toward choosing moral action.

Practice for Adult Learners

While managers need opportunities to practice ethical decision-making with time to reflect on their experiences, the common approach to ethics education is to teach policies via rote content delivered online (Sekerka, 2009). Such learning may enhance compliance, but it does little to cultivate ownership of ethical issues or a desire to pursue right action. Because ethical challenges can be distressing or potentially threatening, people need practice sharing how they effectively navigate them and time to reflect on what promotes or deters their willingness to act ethically.

Insights from adult learning theory suggest that managers need an alternative approach to learn how to respond effectively when faced with ethical dilemmas. Adult learning theorists advanced the concept of *andragogy* (cf. Knowles, 1968), which Knowles defines as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (1980, p. 43). We believe that such an approach is important for managerial ethics education. While the scope of adult learning theory is vast, the core assumptions underlying andragogy create a framework from which administrators can build more effective ethics training programs. Summarizing Knowles, Merriam (2001, p. 5) defines the adult learner as someone with:

(1) an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning;

(2) an accumulated reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning;

(3) learning needs closely related to changing social roles;

(4) a problem-centered focus, interested in immediate application of knowledge; and,

(5) the motivation to learn by internal rather than external factors.

This list provides the design features of an effective learning venue for today's managers. To effectively explore the ethical decision-making process, managers need to help direct their learning by reflecting on content that is meaningful to them and applicable to their daily work. In short, personal experiences need to become the text upon which managers reflect and build their learning.

The idea of putting one's experience at the center of learning is not new. Echoing well-known learning theorists (e.g., Lindeman, 1927), Brookfield (1996, p. 377) said, "the belief that adult teaching should be grounded in adults' experiences, and that these experiences represent a valuable resource, is currently cited as crucial by adult educators of every conceivable ideological hue." Kolb's classic experiential theory proposes that "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p. 41) through a four-step process including a concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and actively experimenting with new behaviors. Laditka and Houck (2006) demonstrated how experiential approaches in teaching ethics are particularly effective, stimulating interest and understanding across cultures (Sanyal, 2000). Furthermore, when group discourse is fostered during learning, participants engage in shared sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Studies examining best practices in ethics education also support the use of collective learning spaces (Sekerka, 2009). As people explore what is important to them, they are better able to examine what contributes to their thinking and behaviors.

Balanced Experiential Inquiry

Balanced Experiential Inquiry (BEI) provides managers with an opportunity to collaboratively practice their ethical decision-making processes (Sekerka and Godwin, 2010), thus helping to increase capacity for ethical performance. Table 1 summarizes

how each phase of BEI relates to the principles of adult learning and the experiential learning cycle. Unlike traditional ethics programs that use generic cases for discussion, BEI uses stories from participants' own workplace experiences. While creating an atmosphere for conversational learning through group discussion, BEI begins with personal introspection (Baker *et al*., 2005).

--Table 1 here--

The notion of balance is core to BEI, which weaves together both diagnostic (deficit-based) and appreciative (strength-based) techniques (Sekerka *et al*., 2006, 2009). BEI invites the sharing of past stories and the honoring of both positive and negative aspects of managers' handling of past ethical issues. Balance is further embedded in BEI as sessions encourage participants to seek balance between their individual perceptions and the group's dialogue regarding what constitutes a moral response. As explored in BEI, ethical decision-making also requires balancing rationality, emotions, and morality with situational factors and external demands. In considering both positive and negative experiences, along with personal strengths and weaknesses, BEI helps employees directly address tensions produced by such dichotomies.

Cultivating Desire to Act Ethically

Engagement in BEI helps managers examine the origins of their own decisions and behaviors. Although moral action is prompted by both internal and external motivations (Ashkanasy *et al*., 2006; Jones and Ryan, 1997), an organization's overdependence on rewards or punishments can reduce moral action to a transactional exchange (Tenbrunsel, 1998). Organizations need to support and build managers' personal responsibility for ethical behaviors by encouraging them to be interested in their own ethical strengths.

Desired moral approbation, representing influences that come from self and others to promote (or curtail) the decision to proceed with moral action, is defined as "differences in the amount of approval that individuals require from themselves or others in order to proceed with moral actions without discomfort" (Jones and Ryan, 1997, p. 449). Managers must understand how their internal scripts and perceptions of external evaluations influence their desires to act ethically. Such understanding relates to the idea of moral identity (Hardy and Carlo, 2005) and reflects how one's internal view of self serves as a source for moral motivation. According to Lapsley and Narvaez (2004), a moral person is someone "for whom moral constructs are chronically accessible and easily activated for social information processing" (p. 200). Accessibility to one's moral scripts may be difficult when moral action requires a person to overcome perceived risks to self. For example, concerns about being ostracized, shunned, or having to endure damage to one's reputation (Sekerka and Zolin, 2007).

Assuming a person believes oneself to be of good character (i.e., positive moral identity), less reliance on external evaluations and more emphasis on internal evaluations can increase desire to move toward moral action. Activities encouraging reflection and dialogue can help people understand their past actions, building confidence for future successes (i.e., self-efficacy). Because reflection in BEI elevates an internally-driven responsibility for ethical decision-making, participation in BEI is expected to increase the saliency of self and decrease the saliency of others.

> *Hypothesis 1a:* Individuals engaging in BEI will experience increased need for approval from self in deciding to proceed with moral action.

> *Hypothesis 1b:* Individuals engaging in BEI will experience decreased need for approval from others in deciding to proceed with moral action.

Accounting for Emotions

Engaging in moral action has long been viewed as having an affective component (Etzioni, 1988). Brain imaging research has shown that response times in moral decision-making are indeed influenced by emotional responses (Greene *et al*., 2001). Yet, little is known about specific factors that modulate emotions in the decision-making process. Some argue that ethical challenges vary to the extent that emotional processing is involved (Greene *et al*., 2001). Others contend that the ethical decision-making process is laden with prefactual emotions (what one anticipates feeling if one proceeds with a moral response), which can move a person toward or away from the *desire* to engage in ethical action (Sekerka and Bagozzi, 2007).

Although revisiting past ethical challenges can rekindle negative emotions, BEI's reflective examination of previous encounters can help people achieve a sense of control. Because BEI is designed to empower people regarding their future actions, the process is expected to beneficially impact participants' emotions. Ethical challenges typically present situations that are undesirable, based upon perceived risks. Therefore, we express this favorable emotional impact as a reduction in negativity.

> *Hypothesis 2:* Individuals engaging in BEI will experience decreased negative emotions.

THE STUDY

Sample and Methods

To test these hypotheses, a field study was conducted with U.S. military managers. This organizational setting was selected because members have overt professional values and identities that underscore the importance of moral action in job performance. We anticipated that an impact of BEI on commitment to moral action would be detected in

this setting. The sample (N=169) was 75% male and 73% Caucasian, with a mean age of 27.64 (SD 4.77). Participants were randomly divided into two sections with five groups in each, approximately balanced on military rank.

Treatment and Measures

A BEI exercise was performed with a timed and structured format to ensure consistency across groups (Appendix). Participants began by recalling an ethical challenge. They were then asked to write down a description of the challenge and what they were thinking and feeling at the time the challenge occurred. A facilitator (first author) helped participants examine what promoted or curtailed their abilities to engage in moral action.

For both sections, DMA was measured before and after the BEI session using scales proposed by Ryan and Riordan (2000). Participants in the second section (N=95) were also asked pre- and post-BEI to rate their affective experiences (e.g., Barrett and Russell, 1998) with adjective sets of emotions used in similar studies (e.g., Reis *et al*., 2000).

RESULTS[2]

Changes resulting from engagement in BEI are summarized in Table 2. For each scale, a test for homogeneity across groups produced a non-significant result (smallest p = .133). Hence, the impact of BEI did not vary appreciably across groups.

--Table 2 here--

Desired Moral Approbation. The Cronbach alphas for the praise and blame

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[2] Computations were carried out using SPSS 12.0. Statistical significance was determined by a p-value < .05. Tests of zero mean change were carried out by paired t-tests on the differences between after-BEI scores and before-BEI scores; these tests addressed whether the workshop was effective in general. Tests of homogeneity in change were carried out by random-effects one-factor ANOVAs on the differences between after-BEI scores and before-BEI scores with group assignment as the factor; these tests addressed whether the effectiveness of the workshop varied by group assignment.

components of DMA from others were.881 and .838 respectively, while the Cronbach alpha for DMA from self was.882. The mean change in DMA from self (-.37) did not attain statistical significance; therefore, Hypothesis 1a was not supported. However, participants expressed a significant reduction in DMA from others (mean change -2.15, $t(161)= -3.856$, $p<.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1b. Although the mean change in the blame component of DMA from others (.49) did not attain statistical significance, there was a striking decrease in the praise component (mean change -2.71, $t(163)= -6.480$, $p<.001$) attributable to significant reductions on seven of the nine individual items (Table 3).

--Table 3 here--

Emotions. There was a significant decrease in negative emotions (mean change -.54, $t(90)= -2.67$, $p=.009$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Interesting to note, there was also an increase in positive emotions, albeit not significant (mean change .41). Regarding specific items in the negative emotions scale (Table 4), there was a significant decrease in feeling sluggish (mean change -.19, $t(90)= -2.02$, $p=.046$), and there was a near-significant decrease in feeling afraid (mean change -.12, $t(90)= -1.89$, $p=.063$). The mean changes on the other three items, though not significant, were all in the decreasing direction.

--Table 4 here--

Discussion and Implications

Managers participating in BEI experienced decreased negative emotions as they worked with others to deconstruct their ethical challenges. Interestingly, engagement in BEI also reduced their need for praise from others. Taken together the findings suggest

that experiential learning processes such as BEI can bolster managers' internal desires to stay on an ethical decision-making path. That said, BEI participation did not reduce their concerns about criticism, blame, and fault-finding, which remain important areas for further attention and research.

If managers recognize ethical challenges but remain silent, moral muteness prevails (Bird and Waters, 1989). Thus, this study's implications for managerial practice are that ethical reflection and dialogue must be valued. To learn how to confront challenges and communicate concerns routinely (Drumwright and Murphy, 2004), managers must be prepared to point out abuses, question vulnerabilities, speak up for ideals, and accept responsibility for their actions (Bird, 2002). To create and sustain such proactive ethical environments, ongoing dialogues such as those fostered by BEI must become a part of daily task actions. Facilitated inquiry into salient ethical challenges as offered by BEI is a starting point for discovering what supports individual and collective desires to engage in ethical action.

Limitations and Next Steps

As a field study, our research lacked a control group. Moreover, the absence of diversity within the sample is a limitation. Future research must consider gender, status, and role differences within a variety of organizational structures. Additionally, systemic interrelationships (e.g., with a variety of stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, community members) must also be examined to sustain moral progress (Werhane, 2002). We recommend a longitudinal design that tracks employees' ability to exercise moral competencies over time.

Despite these limitations, our work invites further theory development. For

example, competencies enhancing desire to proceed with moral action must be considered in the context of classic moral decision-making theory. In particular, Rest's (1986) linear model must be expanded to reflect a more systemic process, one that has no end but rather proceeds in a continual cycle, self-renewed through an ongoing process we refer to as moral preparation. This emerging concept of moral preparation builds upon the Platonic concept of moral motivation, entailing the desire to be moral and to develop a sustained commitment to moral action (cf. Colby & Damon, 1992). Drawing on Fredrickson and Joiner's (2002) work to describe upward spirals triggered by positive emotions, we believe that engagement in moral behavior builds a propensity for additional moral action. We are thus led to re-conceptualize how we view ethical decision-making, suggesting that the traditional linear path be recast to reflect an upward spiral. In so doing the person continually works to reaffirm their desire to move toward ethical action in each stage.

In sum, our work demonstrates the importance of using experiential learning to augment ethics education in the workplace. In addition, we have highlighted ideas for additional research that will help cultivate a realistic, sustainable approach toward ethical performance.

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Table 1: Balanced Experiential Inquiry (BEI) Process as Related to Adult and Experiential Learning

BEI Step	Adult Learning Principle	Experiential Learning Cycle Phase
1. Identify an ethical scenario	Building on personal life experience; Self-directed learning	*Concrete* experience, drawing upon past ethical challenges
2. Examine strengths and barriers	Problem solving and building capacity (deficit- and strength-based inquiry)	*Reflection* and *Abstract Conceptualization* regarding thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
3. Report-outs	Immediate application of knowledge	*Conceptualization* about experiences and beginning to apply new concepts/behaviors
4. Group discussion	Learning related to self-concept and social roles; Self-directed practice	*Active Experimentation* with new perceptions and practices in cooperation with others

Table 2: Scores Before and After BEI Engagement*

Scale (no. of items)	**Before** Mean±SD	**After** Mean±SD	**Change** Mean±SD	**t(df) and p-value for Zero Mean Change**	**$f(df_1,df_2)$ and p-value for Homogeneity in Change**
DMA (20)	97.49±15.16	95.19±15.17	-2.59±7.47	t(161)= -4.409 p<.001	f(9,152)=1.457 p=.169
Self (5)	28.13±5.70	27.92±5.59	-.37±2.96	t(162)= -1.589 p=.114	f(9,153)=.846 p=.575
Others (15)	69.36±15.52	67.30±15.59	-2.15±7.09	t(161)= -3.856 p<.001	f(9,152)=1.543 p=.138
Praise (9)	45.71±10.35	42.95±10.12	-2.71±5.36	t(163)= -6.480 p<.001	f(9,154)=1.556 p=.133
Blame (6)	23.65±7.68	24.24±7.60	.49±4.08	t(161)= 1.541 p=.125	f(9,152)=.822 p=.596

*Apparent discrepancies between mean change score and mean after score minus mean before score are due to several participants responding prior to the workshop but not after (or vice versa). Test statistics and p-values for hypotheses of zero *Mean Change* and *Homogeneity in Change* are provided in the last two columns. Values for DMA items are 1-7 (N=169).

Table 3: Change in Desired Moral Approbation from Others in Praise*

Scale Items	Before Mean ± SD	After Mean ± SD	Change Mean ± SD	t(df) and p-value for zero mean Change
1. I want others to think that my decisions are ethical.	6.01 ± 1.35	5.54 ± 1.47	-.46 ± 1.09	t(163)= -5.39 p<.001
2. I want others to view me as a moral person.	6.12 ± 1.14	5.69 ± 1.31	-.41 ± 1.00	t(163)= -5.33 p<.001
3. I hope others view my behaviors as ethical.	6.01 ± 1.16	5.60 ± 1.28	-.39 ± .83	t(163)= -6.06 p<.001
4. I want others to support my decisions on moral issues.	5.57 ± 1.30	5.34 ± 1.31	-.24 ± .96	t(163)= -3.16 p=.002
5. I want others to praise my choices in ethical situations.	4.62 ± 1.66	4.36 ± 1.60	-.27 ± 1.32	t(163)= -2.61 p=.010
6. I feel bad when other people condemn me for my choices in moral situations.	4.24 ± 1.88	4.06 ± 1.68	-.18 ± 1.36	t(163)= -1.67 p=.097
7. I dislike it when others think that I have done something wrong.	5.03 ± 1.81	4.52 ± 1.61	-.51 ± 1.28	t(163)= -5.13 p<.001
8. I worry about whether others view my decisions and actions as moral.	4.30 ± 1.79	4.04 ± 1.58	-.24 ± 1.29	t(163)= -2.43, p=.016
9. It is important to me to get praise for doing the right thing.	3.80 ± 1.70	3.80 ± 1.63	-.01 ± 1.02	t(163)= -.153 p=.879

*Apparent discrepancies between mean change score and mean after score minus mean before score are due to several participants responding prior to the workshop but not after (or vice versa). Test statistics and p-values for a hypothesis of zero mean change are provided in the last column. Values for DMA items are 1-7 (N=169).

Table 4: Change in Negative and Positive Emotions*

Scale Items	Before Mean±SD	After Mean±SD	Change Mean±SD	t(df) and p-value for zero mean Change
1. Negative-Afraid	1.36±.82	1.25±.64	-.12±.61	t(90)= -1.89 p=.063
2. Negative-Sad	1.49±.91	1.43±.83	-.04±.61	t(90)= -.684 p=.496
3. Negative-Anxious	2.15±1.15	2.11±1.12	-.08±.76	t(90)= -.961 p=.339
4. Negative-Angry	1.67±1.14	1.55±1.02	-.11±.78	t(90)= -1.34 p=.183
5. Negative-Sluggish	2.45±1.21	2.23±1.20	-.19±.88	t(90)= -2.02 p=.046
6. Positive-Relaxed	2.72±1.18	2.72±1.02	.01±.84	t(90)= .125 p=.901
7. Positive-Proud	2.86±1.24	2.96±1.32	.03±.90	t(90)= .349 p=.728
8. Positive-Excited	2.04±1.15	2.33±1.25	.23±.93	t(90)= 2.36 p=.020
9. Positive-Appreciative	2.71±1.36	2.89±1.38	.14±.94	t(90)= 1.45 p=.150
10. Positive-Enthusiastic	2.42±1.21	2.46±1.24	-.01±.77	t(90)= -.137 p=.892

*Apparent discrepancies between mean change score and mean after score minus mean before score are due to several participants responding prior to the workshop but not after (or vice versa). Test statistics and p-values for a hypothesis of zero mean change are provided in the last column. Values for emotion items are 1-5 (N=95).

APPENDIX

Balanced Experiential Inquiry Exercise

What is your scenario?

Think back to a time in your military service when you were faced with an ethical challenge. An example might be that you were in a situation where there was a conflict between doing what you thought you should do and what the organizational, command, 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 situation. As you think back about experiences that you have encountered while on the job, this was 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 to be present. To summarize, the experience presented a moral issue and, at the time, none of the options seemed particularly favorable.

Reflect on:

1. What was the ethical challenge?
2. What were you thinking at the time?
3. What were you feeling at the time?

Discuss:

4. What supported or curtailed your ability to engage in moral action?
5. What about the command supported or curtailed your decision to act?

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