

# PRESERVING INTEGRITY IN THE FACE OF CORRUPTION: EXERCISING MORAL COURAGE IN THE PATH TO RIGHT ACTION

*Leslie E. Sekerka\**

Organizational Behavior and Psychology,  
Ethics in Action Research and Education Center  
Menlo College, 1000 El Camino Real  
Atherton, CA 94027-4301

## ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

While a great deal of research has been done to find the causes and conditions for corruption, we still know very little about how to help people sustain their moral strength when working in ethically corrosive environments. This paper attends to this void in the literature by looking at how to help prepare managers for such encounters. Qualitative analysis reflects managers who stand up to their ethical challenges with moral courage activate specific skills that support this type of response. Implications for ethics training suggests that professional moral courage (PMC) needs to be viewed as a managerial competency, a skill set that can be honed and practiced in organizational settings. Recommendations for how to cultivate a workplace that supports moral strength are also presented.

*The ancestor of every action is a thought.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

When you think of corruption what do you see? Perhaps you envision specific business or government executives who appear in news headlines, those touted as agents of fraud, conspiracy, misappropriation, and other lascivious behaviors (e.g., Abramoff, Madoff, Perez, or Skilling).<sup>2</sup> Maybe you think of a particular industry being controlled by a powerful faction

---

\* Ph.D. Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Psychology, Director, Ethics in Action Research and Education Center; Phone: (831) 648-1965 ~ Email: lesekerk@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Leslie E. Sekerka, Justin D. McCarthy, and Richard P. Bagozzi, "Developing Professional Moral Courage: Leadership Lessons from Everyday Ethical Challenges in Today's Military." In *Moral Courage in Organizations: Doing the Right Thing at Work*, ed. Debra R. Comer and Gina Vega (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011). Used by permission of M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-10-most-unethical-people-in-business;>  
<http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/2009Scandals>).

or family. Or, perhaps you have a cinematic-type image of mysterious unnamed individuals meeting secretly in remote locations, colluding to gain advantage with insider information. It could be an experience you encountered first hand, trying to get something expedited and being expected to pay ‘under the table’ for actual service to be realized. Whatever you envision, it is unlikely that specific ethical codes, rules, and laws came to mind. Rather, you imagine people—men and women engaged in inappropriate and, most likely, illegal activity. Corruption is about people who have decided to engage in business transactions in ways that ignore or circumvent the rules to enhance their own goals. Therefore, it is unlikely that you view such individuals as having integrity. But those engaged in corruption may discount their choices, explaining away their decisions and actions as necessary, or simply part of ‘doing business.’ In so doing, they may separate how they see themselves from their decisions and actions, maintaining their personal ethical character is still in tact.

The reality is that most of us are susceptible to the influence of social norms, interpersonal and environmental influences that can be deleterious to our character—whether we admit it to ourselves or not. If we assume that a person has integrity and is faced with pressure to engage in corrupt activities to accomplish their business objectives, how might they go about preserving their moral strength in the face of such practices? To answer this question, the metaphor of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ apples and barrels, reflecting people and the organization they work in, is a useful tool (e.g., Treviño and Youngblood, 1990; Ashforth, Gioia, Robinson, and Treviño, 2008). Scholars have taken great care in ascertaining how corruption forms, spreads, and establishes a hold on entire processes and industries. But we still know very little about how to help people, the so-called ‘good apples,’ sustain their goodness when working in morally corrosive environments, with the so-called ‘bad apples’ in ‘bad barrels.’ I address this void in the literature by looking at how managers can prepare for such encounters by understanding how to develop and build their moral muscles on a daily basis. In so doing, managers can become more adept at meeting and dealing with the pressure, enticement, and potential threat that may be involved when facing such ethical challenges.

## CORRUPTION AS AN ETHICAL CHALLENGE

The causes and conditions for corruption are known to be both surface and systemic, with the dynamics of organizational behavior continually moving to establish networks, which can often become its source (Nielsen, 2003). But acts of fraud, bribery, graft, embezzlement, nepotism, cronyism, cheating, and lying are all behaviors made by individuals. Corruption comes from the Latin word *corruptus*, which means to *utterly break* or *destroy*. The core definition of corruption relates to thought processes and actions, described as the *impairment of integrity* or *taking a path that is improper or a departure from what is pure or correct*.<sup>3</sup>

Such improprieties can be analyzed at any level, but it is with the individual where we can examine the decision-making strategies that involve a weave between character, thought, choice, and action. While whole systems continue to invoke a call for ethical performance standards, individuals are the moral agents who make the decisions and conduct daily activities that create business enterprise. Some may declare that scholars put too much responsibility on individuals, describing the need for more accountability to be placed at the

---

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

institutional and policy levels. Indeed, responsibility must be assumed at every level. But because the identity of the organization is shaped by the people who work there, although the codes and policies provide a foundation, it's in the decisions and actions made by leaders and managers, where we find a particular impact to the culture and climate of organizational life. Prior research has shown that if individuals choose to preserve their integrity, corrupt practices do not always have to be accepted as permanent or insurmountable (Sekerka, McCarthy, and Bagozzi, *in press*). Assuming a manager encounters corruption, but does not wish to engage in it, moral courage is needed to withstand the pressure or temptations to engage.

Empirical research shows that good (honesty) propels people to action, but bad (deception) is often stronger than good when it comes to influencing psychological reactions (Wang, Galinsky, and Murnighan, 2009). Thus, facing corruption requires moral strength that has the agility to stand up to the lure and potential appeal that corrupt practices may have to offer. An examination of *professional moral courage* (PMC) and the internal processes that support it will help extend the current academic dialogue on corruption. Using a proactive strength-based approach to ethics in the workplace means doing more than just attending to compliance requirements. If we want organizational members, especially managers, to build and maintain their moral strength, they must do so consistently. This includes when they face morally corrosive conditions.

As an interdependent, social, and relational species, humans depend on one another to accomplish their goals, enjoy life, and to survive. Many of us go about our everyday organizational activities under the influence of social norms that evolve to increase cooperation and collective strength. This integration with others plays an important role in how we choose to accomplish our tasks. We know that otherwise “decent people can end up engaging in questionable practices as a result of immersion in, and socialization into, the social and cultural environment” (Ashforth et al., pp. 672-673). How can this happen? Is character integrity actually this fragile and malleable? Social and performance pressures, arrogance, greed, and the lack of moral awareness can influence good people to make poor choices, resist action, and to make individual and collective decisions that are unethical. Phillip Zimbardo, known for the Stanford Prison Experiment, describes the potential for all humans to undergo a transformation of character, depicting how ordinary people have the propensity to engage in acts of wrongdoing and even “evil,” given their environment (2007). Given this reality, people need to be aware of their vulnerabilities and practice cultivating the desire, activation, and execution of moral strength on a daily basis.

The reality is that motives for corrupt behavior may be driven by conscious and unconscious desires to enhance or protect the self or one's organization. Moreover, when personal and collective principles vie for placement in decision-making, people experience tension and pressure to make choices amongst competing values. Sometimes, even without being aware of it, people select self-serving paths that can corrode their integrity, which may ultimately lead to broader and more frequent engagement in less than ethical thoughts, decisions, and actions.

Assuming a ‘good apple’ has a moral identity that includes ethical awareness and the desire to achieve principled right action, how do they effectively deal with corruption? This calls for the incorporation of internal processes, personal skills that help the person navigate the challenge with PMC. One's freedom to choose can be easily obfuscated by negative emotions (anticipated or experienced) (Sekerka and Bagozzi, 2007).

Such fears of potential loss can mitigate the desire to maintain a courageous stance. In some cases, lack of willingness to collude may pose a threat. Thus, the choice to follow laws, policies, and ethical principles set forth by the government, industry, organization, and one's own moral identity necessitates the use of internal efforts that support PMC in the moral decision-making path.

## PROFESSIONAL MORAL COURAGE

In working with hundreds of managers in ethics workshops conducted in the field, I have heard a variety of ways that people respond to ethical challenges, corruption among them. My colleagues and I decided to perform a series of studies to better understand moral courage in the workplace, with a goal to learn more about how to educate managers to build the capacity for moral strength. To start, we asked thirty-five military managers, officers in the United States Navy, to describe their ethical dilemma experiences and how they responded to them. Ninety-eight scenarios were analyzed with the top three ethical issues identified as: 1) *Rule bending to accomplish a task* (29.3%); 2) *Rule bending to accommodate senior officer's request* (13.1%); and 3) *Inappropriate use of funds or missing funds/resources* (13.1%) (see Table D).

We began by qualitatively analyzing the scenarios, working to ascertain what PMC looks like in daily operations. Those who demonstrate moral strength in their decision-making process go beyond adherence to regulations as they strive to achieve a morally principled response despite barriers (for details of the methods and analysis see Sekerka, Bagozzi, and Charnigo, 2009). This initial analysis helped us to define PMC as marked by the presence of five themes. Stated as:

1. *Moral Agency*: possesses a predisposition to be a moral agent;
2. *Multiple Values*: uses multiple value sets to determine moral action;
3. *Endures Threat*: faces danger or threat, yet pursues moral action;
4. *Beyond Compliance*: applies rules but also goes beyond compliance to consider what is right, just, and appropriate;
5. *Moral Goal*: moves to complete tasks with the application of moral principles to achieve a moral outcome.

The validation of this depiction of PMC is consistent with the existing academic literature (Solomon, 1998). Once we had a working definition of PMC, additional qualitative analysis enabled the identification of four personal governance practices, competencies involved in achieving PMC (for details of the methods and analysis see Sekerka, McCarthy, and Bagozzi, *in press*). They are: a) emotional signaling, b) reflective pause, c) self-regulation, and d) moral preparation. These competencies that support PMC (also referred to as moral strength) are now described in greater detail with sample quotations to illustrate and add clarity.

*Emotional Signaling*: Because emotions and cognition are intertwined it is difficult to separate them. Emotions contain important signals that influence the cerebral process of ethical decision-making. Therefore, affect plays a critical role in motivating or hindering the choice to engage in PMC.

**Table 1. Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Supply Corps Officers (N=35)\***

Ethical Dilemma Types	Total
Rule bending to accomplish a task	29.3%
Rule bending to accommodate senior officer's request	13.1
Inappropriate use of funds or missing funds/resources	13.1
Sexual activity	10.0
Stealing	8.1
Cheating/lying	8.1
Harassment	7.1
Drug or alcohol abuse	6.1
Payoffs, bribery, or inducements	5.1
	100.0

\*Each officer (35) provided 2-3 examples producing 98 scenarios.

In our study, the emotions that managers most frequently expressed were worry, loneliness, fear, shock or surprise, and feelings of “hurt” (often stemming from a sense of betrayal). A common theme among those who demonstrated PMC was that they initially experience a sense of confusion, agitation, or helplessness. This was often accompanied by a feeling of personal harm and some emotional discomfort or distress. When these emotions were felt, they were not ignored, repressed, or sublimated. Rather, those with PMC used this affective information, serving as an emotional cue. These individuals seemed to be enabled by their emotional awareness rather than being blocked or thwarted by it. It appears that the capacity of being aware of one's emotions gives people a start on dealing with them (coping) and then to regulate this input. Such openness to one's feelings enables certain people to proceed with their decisions with a more informed process, honoring one's visceral reactions to the situation.

This quote highlights how one participant became aware of his emotions and then managed them: *“I felt hurt. My heart was beating fast. I went to go eat, to relax my mind. About two hours later I called my clerk in and said, ‘Hey, let's go through it again.’”* The manager added in his description of the incident that by recognizing and letting his feelings play out, he was better equipped to move forward. This suggests that when negative emotions are not viewed as distractions or suppressed, they can serve as cues to inform one's thought-action process. Thus, emotional signaling is a prompt for PMC, helping to facilitate more informed decision-making. When attentions to one's emotions and a reflective pause to understand them are employed, individuals can become better equipped to proceed more effectively on the path to moral action.

*Reflective Pause:* The use of a reflective pause as part of one's strategy in decision-making represents an ability, regardless of time constraints, to purposively self-impose a time-out for reflection. During this break individuals examine possible avenues for right action, often weighing the pros and cons of the situation or thinking about different periods of time and potential implications (i.e., past and present). This display of prudential judgment appears to be an important component of PMC that manifests during these reflection periods. It is as though the time-out helps people discern options, then garner and build informed momentum toward moral action. Individuals use this period to weigh the options and their

associated outcomes, as they work to gather additional information about the rules and other particulars regarding the situation at hand.

One participant outlined how someone went about qualifying for an award by cutting corners. He explained how a time-out helped him move forward:

“It was more reflecting on the situation. I guess some of the things in the past that started weighing on my mind was a sense of fairness—reading and following the rules. That’s what I was thinking primarily about. Because of what he was doing, and what I had done. I had to think of it in terms of the present, because if I had waited too long, it would have been a done deal, and hard to undo.”

This research has helped us to understand how PMC is bolstered through reflection as people use a ‘time out’ to collect their thoughts, generate options, and seek support during the initial stages of their decision-making effort. Taking time to reflect often alters, overrides, or postpones some initial reactions while also targeting responses for appropriateness. When applied as a daily habit this kind of reflection may actually serve as a portal for all the personal governance practices, but it is especially important for self-regulation.

*Self-regulation:* As we have described thus far, initial reactions to ethical challenges require the use of emotional signaling and reflection. But to habitually pursue right action and to manage and address tough ethical decisions, individuals must balance their reactions, knowing how to manage responsibilities along side of their own personal desires. Managers in all organizations have a variety of goals to achieve; hence, they must be adept at balancing the pursuit of task accomplishment while also incorporating ethical means. How they ethically achieve their goals must be tempered with decisions about when and how to tackle the ethical challenges that emerge. They must discern whether to postpone a response or engage in immediate action. This ability to regulate one’s reactions necessitates restraint coupled with an ability to move forward—despite perceptions that may impose negative impacts to self or others. Moreover, it can be particularly difficult when peers or leaders are the ones engaged in questionable activities, or asking people to engage in actions that are deemed ethically unsound.

One participant described a leader’s behavior that started with small improprieties (inappropriate phone use), but then escalated. Over time, this extended to taking special trips to engage in an extramarital affair:

“I didn’t realize how a situation like that would snowball. And by ignoring it a little bit early [I] emboldened him to do more and more.” He added, “We [the officer and two other officers on board] each had a little piece of the puzzle...and we couldn’t understand the whole picture, we just saw a piece of the picture. But once we shared what we knew and composed the picture, at that point the problem was so far down the road that it was unsalvageable.”

The manager eventually realized that his delayed response contributed to the problem:

“I think in the future, once I get a piece of the picture, and learn to trust that little voice in my head that says, ‘something doesn’t smell right here’ then I need to do something about it right away, because it gets worse with time.”

Using emotional signals and reflection to understand what had happened, he added,

“I think if I was faced with a situation again today, I would close the door, take off the rank, and I would have said, ‘Knock it off.’ But that’s not easy to do, particularly if it’s the first time you face a situation like that.”

Self-regulation is effective personal governance, but it may mean withholding the impulse to act immediately as well as knowing when to proceed.

Many of the managers interviewed expressed that they should have acted sooner, but their respect, appreciation, or care for someone, as well as a sense of loyalty to their command, served to inhibit action and/or their self-regulation (at least initially). Many who waited, however, saw in hindsight that this just exacerbated the problem:

“[The Captain] was probably the most charismatic, dynamic, effective leader I’ve ever worked for, and he flushed it all away because of a character flaw, essentially...I saw how big that snowball got as it rolled downhill.”

The personal governance of self-regulation in support of PMC is driven from within. It serves as an inner strength and compass that provides motivation and direction, often developed through personal struggle. Individuals must be willing to demonstrate moral strength even when those around them, including leaders and peers, do not. Such self-control has been regarded as the moral muscle—an inner directive to alter one’s immediate responses and to redirect them toward the good of others. In this light, psychologists have referred to self-regulation as the cornerstone of virtuous behavior (Baumeister and Exline, 1999). In rare cases some may apply self-regulation naturally, but there is enormous potential for further development of this competency in most people. Learning to quiet one’s impulse to react or ignore the problem, then reflecting upon and managing immediate thoughts and feelings, can begin a course of personal development marked by habits of moral strength.

*Moral Preparation:* Finally, a commitment to right action is developed through a deep understanding of self, fueled by a prefactual thought process concerning how one would and would not act when faced with an ethical challenge in the future. A manager with PMC appears to think through consequences, related to themselves and others, about ethical issues, before real-time events occur. This ongoing preparatory effort includes a consideration of when the person acts or fails to act, and includes the consideration of the emotions, evaluations, and thoughts that serve to influence their decisions and actions. People who continue to be aware of how their emotions and situational factors may influence their reactions, can then choose to respond in similar or different ways as scenarios continue to emerge. This sort of effort can develop a heightened level of moral preparedness for ethical challenges down the line. It is sometimes expressed by continued vigilance of ‘the moral line,’ staying above reproach before situational problems occur.

For example, “*It got bigger and bigger. At what point do I draw the line and say you’ve now crossed? I know now it would be much earlier in the process.*” This manager realized he needed to ‘draw the line’ sooner. We see that people with PMC have thought through positive and negative consequences of acting and not acting, recognize and manage their emotions, and develop a conscious awareness of where the ethical risk areas may be—even before an ethical event arises. This rehearsal process helps prepare individuals for a mindful response-action when problems occur. In addition, moral agents appear to locate their personal ethical

line above what is required by rules and regulations. In so doing, a misstep does not mean immediate infraction.

It appears that moral preparation is likely to be dependent upon the use of other personal governance competencies. For example, the use of emotional signaling, taking a reflective pause, and exercising self-regulation are typically precursors for the ability to proceed with right action in the face of corruption. To build the gestalt capacity of personal governance, managers continually self-monitor and work to maintain an ongoing understanding of their motives. As we learned from the moral agents in our study, competencies that support PMC include a preparation phase, which requires sustained self-awareness and introspection. In aggregate, it is important to recognize that the practices outlined herein can never be perfected. Because each person and every situation is different, our responses to an ethical challenge, on any given day, can vary. Therefore, it is essential that managers continually focus on their own moral development, not relying upon peers, leaders, or the institution to uphold the moral line.

## LEADING WITH PROFESSIONAL MORAL COURAGE

At the onset of this paper we assumed the role of the ‘good apple.’ The intention was to see how a person (a manager) with a desire to maintain moral strength could do so in the face of corruption. While leaders play an integral role in shaping the ethical climate and culture of the organization, they may not assume this responsibility.

As one manager shared,

“We still see the problems we do because senior folks make ethically incorrect decisions and get away with it, thus, setting an example for the junior folks. We all nod our head affirmative and press the ‘I believe’ button on ethics, then turn around and see people making the wrong decisions and climbing the ladder to success.”

Curiously, few organizations have *moral courage* noted as a core competency. Even those that do, tend to simultaneously reinforce mission accomplishment, assertiveness, and risk-taking skills (Furnham, 2002). Given these competing messages, for those committed to ethical performance, it is essential that they initiate and cultivate ongoing ethics dialogue with their co-workers. The idea is to use conversation to help people openly achieve clarity in establishing where the moral line is drawn—and affirming that it is above the norms for compliance. This can be done by fostering reflection around past and present situational challenges and by openly addressing areas known to seed ethical risk. Making time for explicit pauses to discuss ethical issues on a regular basis can contribute to the development of communication norms about how to collectively deal with ethical issues. The idea is to establish a comfort level around ethics as a valued topic for workplace discussion.

Constant vigilance and collective support must be bolstered by an open, transparent, and communicative workplace. If leaders and managers do not ensure that the ethical aspects of performance are built into everyday workplace routines, making conversation about ethical issues safe and expected, the strength of an organization’s ethical core becomes a much greater burden for those working at lower levels. In conducting hundreds of workshops with managers in government and industry, I hear how open communication about ethical

challenges can be achieved, even in hierarchically structured organizations like the military. But this requires a concerted effort among management to demonstrate a sustained commitment toward creating a culture of ongoing learning—at every level.

In “speaking truth to power,” O’Toole (2008) describes how organizations are morally in trouble when leaders become unwilling to test their operating premises about subjects that relate to the treatment of others in achieving business goals. This includes topics like working conditions, the purpose of the firm, and responsibilities to stakeholders and the environment. Failure to openly examine and discuss behavior-driving assumptions will contribute to group think, “a state of collective denial or self-deception which often has disastrous business and ethical consequences” (np).

Taking this information together, if leaders and managers expect ethical performance in their organization, a foundation of moral strength can be built by attending to the following recommendations:

1. Model exemplary personal governance, consistently demonstrating what is valued and expected.
2. Set high expectations for PMC across the board (all positions, functions, and levels), with specific criteria linking personal governance with short- and long-term performance objectives.
3. Conduct collaborative learning about facing ethical challenges—within and among levels—explicitly linking personal governance with effective decisions and behaviors.
4. Weave ethics into systemic processes, including an annual ethics audit and ethics initiatives that go beyond annual online training requirements.
5. Encourage and reward PMC, affirming a sense of openness about sharing emotionally-charged issues.
6. Institute ongoing group reflection and dialogue about ethical breaches, as well as ethical successes (again, explicitly linking personal governance with effective decisions and behaviors).
7. Condemn unethical performance with equity and reward moral excellence with equal gusto. Address moral breaches swiftly, guarding against finger-pointing.
8. Connect everyday values to those expressed in the organization’s long-term mission.

Ethical leadership needs to be assumed at every level to cultivate moral strength, but those at the top of the organization play a pinnacle role in determining how difficult it will be for members to engage in PMC under their influence.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL MORAL STRENGTH**

In shaping their organization’s ethical identity, leaders and managers need to work together to go beyond a surface compliance-based approach, with a focus merely on ethics content for instrumental purposes. If the main thrust of the organization’s ethics program is to convey rules, codes, regulations, and reporting channels, then the value placed on ethical performance is dubious. If management values moral action in the workplace, they need to

establish a broad developmental effort, where employees become part of the process—engaging in regular activities that exercise their personal governance practices.

Although the competencies have been set forth independently in this paper, they are not meant to be taught in isolation, as sequential lectures, or as online training units. Psychologists explain that moral judgment is a function of our cognitive and intuitive-emotional systems—both rational and affective components play a role in ethical behavior (Haidt, 2001; Narvaez, 2010; Sekerka and Bagozzi, 2007). This underscores why employees need to learn how PMC comes from within, learning to balance competing values and external forces. Personal governance must be driven from an inner willingness to maintain one's personal integrity. This helps provide the initial motivation and direction to face corruption. But one must also simultaneously deal with internal desires and fears that can derail an intended course toward moral action.

In referencing Kohlberg's stages of moral development (1981; 1983), Marie Ragghanti, a woman who exercised PMC to face government corruption in Tennessee, describes how people functioning at lower levels of moral maturity are often baffled by those who function at higher ones (Hejka-Ekins, 1992). In some cases, moral agents are viewed with skepticism, perceived as choosing to engage in morally courageous actions because of ulterior motives, with self-interest being surmised as the backbone of their purpose. After a very painful, drawn out, and life-changing ordeal as a result of her whistle-blowing, Ragghanti insists that while corruption is systemic, at its root are peoples' desire for personal gain. In some cases this may be indirect, as when unethical actions stem from organizational loyalties. Collusion in unethical activities may result from gains that are not necessarily monetary; rather, a sense of being part of and/or belonging to the group. For those in government, such esteem-building gains have strong appeal, and can be prized and valued more than the public's interest.

If the organization is truly committed to a proactive strength-based approach (compliance with moral strength), techniques that draw upon employees' experiences can be particularly useful (Sekerka and Godwin, *in press*). By embracing ethical development as a community endeavor, personal governance can be adopted on both an individual and collective level. The idea of infusing a deeper level of learning means that employees develop a desire to 'do the right thing' in their everyday task actions. Establishing this desire for PMC means to inculcate this expectation in the meaning of work itself. This necessitates shared understanding about what successful performance means, and then developing the skills to achieve it. Change management techniques are useful in fostering dialogue and reflection, which can empower employees to build positive momentum and the capacity for discovery and learning. And, rather than limiting ethics to rules, facilitated guided inquiry can help employees co-create the conditions that helps render skill develop in support of PMC.

Research on organizational corruption indicates that firms need a strategy to identify and prevent it, employ detection and eradication mechanisms, and instill learning from past instances of corruption (Bashara and Schipani, 2009). An examination of best practices in ethics education and training in the workplace shows that employees need face to face interaction to collectively address these areas (Sekerka, 2009). It is important for people to feel that they are part of a learning community, working together to address the challenge of corruption with support from their peers, managers, and leaders. Moreover, the concerns that individuals perceive to be most relevant must be the focus of interactive experiential learning processes.

To achieve this type of open and developmental effort, *balanced experiential inquiry* (BEI) has been shown to increase curiosity, decrease negative emotions, and bolster managers' desire to proceed with moral action, without external affirmations or praise (Sekerka, 2008). It is considered a hybrid approach to organizational learning and development because it weaves two very different core change management techniques together (diagnostic- and appreciative-based inquiry). Here, employees share their ethical challenges, airing both successes and times of difficulty. This provides a platform for how to conduct ongoing reflection and discovery, helping people to unearth and review how they overcame barriers to moral action or were blocked by them. Employees are guided to use their own stories to determine what strengths can be leveraged, as well as how to resolve unsettled conflict. This can often be related to internal inconsistencies that contribute to deception and fraud, setting the stage for corruption.

Initially this type of process is facilitated by a trainer or practitioner. But it is essential that such activities become inculcated into workplace routines. The goal is help managers and/or supervisors conduct ethics reflection and dialogue as a part of group staff and planning meetings, as well as being integrated into coaching and feedback individual sessions. Techniques like BEI help employees tap a deeper level of learning as they engage in critical ethical thinking, decision-making processes, and practice new behaviors. Such activities are necessary elements of work life, if PMC is to become a part of employees' expected performance capability. Information gleaned from BEI sessions can help people identify where potential ethical risks reside and how employees can pursue PMC with personal governance. As organizational inconsistencies emerge, people in different roles, functions, and status work together to see where their assets reside and where improvements need to be exacted. Because BEI elevates both strengths and areas for improvement, employees can draw upon their greatest assets as they problem solve, exercising transparency and openness in concert with others. In so doing, people can become more aware of and sensitive to their emotional signals and then self-regulate these feelings as they prepare for moral action. But it is the actions of management that ultimately serve as the cornerstone of the organization's ethical health. While individual contributors need to practice and exercise personal governance, leaders are responsible for setting a consistent example and creating an environment that expects, supports, and nurtures moral strength. This means a workplace where everyday habits move to achieve ethical performance. It also means not waiting for issues to emerge, but looking for how and where practices and assumptions in operations may be vulnerable to corruption.

This brings us back to how leaders and managers need to model personal governance as they simultaneously work to cultivate these practices within their community. A quote from one manager engaged in our research described what it was like to work in a unit where PMC exists, and how moral strength was expected by everyone:

"It's the way [our senior leadership] conducted themselves with the crew, high expectations, very demanding, but at the same time respectful and professional. You didn't want to let them down. They were well focused and well organized. It was like a symphony orchestra. How that influenced moral behavior, well the CO had a strong moral compass. I thrive in that; it makes me want to do the right thing, makes me want to be a part of that community; do right things for the people there."

Clearly, the ability to face corruption can be bolstered by responsible leadership. It becomes that much more essential that leaders and managers choose to model, endorse, and strengthen PMC as an ongoing part of their daily operations. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Some people, at the highest levels, choose to hypocritically expect ethical performance without lending their support. This leaves the genuine ethical leadership of the organization up to every member, at every level.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In reading, coding, and listening to hundreds of ethical accounts in my research, teaching, and workshops, the idea of ongoing learning is critical, especially with regards to moral preparation. Managers with PMC have predetermined mindset to be a moral agent *before* an ethical challenge emerges. Like a volunteer emergency responder, you know if you are the person who pulls over to help someone in distress. You know you are a moral agent, because you have chosen to be that type of person—prior to the event. This is not an assumption, it is who you are. You probably have a record of this type of behavior in your past actions. Point being, when faced with corruption, people with PMC have already made a decision to act ethically, *before* the issue arises. Thus, when faced with corruption the question is not, “Should I, or should I not engage in this activity?” Rather, the question is, “What is the next ethical thing to do in this situation?”

The personal governance competencies discussed in this paper are the moral muscles that help to support a morally courageous response. Toning these muscles necessitates the self-monitoring of internal thoughts and feelings. In so doing, people work at being honest with themselves. Moral preparation means having a better understanding of one’s own motives, recognizing the purpose of one’s actions by asking oneself, “What’s in it for me?” In addressing an ethical challenge people with PMC work to ascertain if their motive is based upon self-interest, and if so, to rethink their motives and how that shapes their planned response. These people learn to face and deal with their thoughts and feelings, working to steer them in the direction of ‘goodness.’ When their desires or feelings are inappropriately self-serving or deleterious, they self-regulate to maintain a moral path.

In studying managers who demonstrate PMC, their stories highlight how they maintain a sense of vigilance, with regards to identifying ethical issues (looking for them). They try to hone in on and address the potential for ethical concerns, before they turn into major issues. They remain cognitively nimble, reflecting backwards and forwards in time as they review experiences and potential consequences of their options. Those who engage in PMC reflect upon ‘lessons learned’ while they remain open to information in their decision-making. What’s more, they look for how they might prohibit the problem from occurring again. These people seem to have a continuous improvement mindset, considering how to deal with similar or nuanced conditions that have the potential to emerge again. Moral preparation in support of PMC necessitates sustained self-awareness, personal introspection, and the willingness to consider multiple vantage points in an effort to better understand the situation and how to effectively respond given short- and long-term outcomes.

In working to achieve PMC, the aim is not to be above others or to be virtuous. In fact, managers demonstrating PMC often recall past experiences when they were morally

irresponsible. They often make a point to explain how they use these past transgressions as an inner resource to fuel their present desire to preserve and exercise their present integrity. Past mistakes can be a catalyst for PMC, while also encouraging humility. Humility is central to PMC, because it keeps a person 'right-sized,' ushering a kind of freedom to engage and a willingness to be less than perfect. Moreover, keeping the ego in check helps managers continue on a moral decision-making path, despite the potential for personal negative consequences. Managers with PMC work to stay open and learn from others, regardless of position or status. It seems that humility stabilizes the importance of moral action over concerns to secure personal needs.

According to psychologists, learning is a relatively permanent change that comes about as a result of experience or practice. It is *relative* because without use, whatever is learned can dissipate. People can learn how to engage in certain thoughts and behaviors that can support their ability to respond to corruption with moral strength. But because individuals and situations are different, and our current state (physically and emotionally) is constantly changing, there is no guarantee that we will always respond to an ethical challenge with the same level of moral strength. If managers want to be prepared to face the really tough issues, like corruption, they need to work at maintaining their own ethical health, by regularly exercising personal governance. These practices can be learned and strengthened, but not perfected. This underscores the importance of continually working to build the capacity for PMC as a managerial competency in everyday organizational life.

While leaders and policy makers are supposedly responsible for modeling behavior and creating an environment that cultivates moral strength, this may not be the case. Professional moral courage is a personal choice that each person must ultimately decide for themselves. Is having moral strength of value? Is it important for me to demonstrate? If it is, am I willing to work for it?

## REFERENCES

- Ashforth, B.E., Gioia, D.A., Robinson, S.L., and Trevino, L.K. 2008. Introduction to special topic forum re-viewing organizational corruption. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(3), 670–684.
- Bashara, N.D., and Schipani, C.A. 2009. Strengthening the ties that bind: Preventing corruption in the executive suite. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 88, 765–780.
- Baumeister, R.F. and Exline, J.J. 1999. Virtue, personality, and social relations: Self-control as the moral muscle. *Journal of Personality* 35(1): 1165-94.
- Furnham, A. 2002. Managers as change agents. *Journal of Change Management*, 3(1): 21-30.
- Haidt, J. 2001. The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, 108: 814–834.
- Hejka-Ekins, A. 1992. Marie Ragghianti: Moral courage in exposing corruption. In Terry Cooper and N. Dale Wright (eds.), *Exemplary public administrators: Character and leadership in government* (pp. 304-323). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992.
- Kohlberg, L. 1981. *Philosophy of moral development: Moral stages and the idea of justice*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Kohlberg, L., Levine, C., and Hewer, A. 1983. *Moral stages: A current formulation and a response to critics*. New York: Karger.
- Narvaez, D. 2010. Moral complexity the fatal attraction of truthiness and the importance of mature moral functioning. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5: 163–181.
- Nielsen, R. 2003. Corruption networks and implications for ethical corruption reform. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 42(2), 125-149.
- O’Toole, J. 2008. Speaking truth to power. In Warren Bennis, Daniel Goleman, and James O’Toole (eds.), *Transparency: How leaders create a culture of candor* (pp. 45-92). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sekerka, L.E. 2008. Are managers curious about ethics? A process to prepare managers for moral agency. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the *Western Academy of Management*, Oakland, CA.
- Sekerka, L.E. 2009. Organizational ethics education and training: A review of best practices and their application. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 13(2), 77-95.
- Sekerka, L.E. and Bagozzi, R.P. 2007. Moral courage in the workplace: Moving to and from the desire and decision to act. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 16(11), 132-142.
- Sekerka, L.E., Bagozzi, R.P., and Charnigo, R. 2009. Facing ethical challenges in the workplace: Conceptualizing and measuring professional moral courage. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 89(4), 565-579.
- Sekerka, L.E. and Godwin, L. *in press*. Strengthening professional moral courage: A balanced approach to ethics training. *Training and Management Development Methods*, 4.
- Sekerka, L. E., McCarthy, D., and Bagozzi, R. *in press*. Developing the capacity for professional moral courage: Facing daily ethical challenges in today’s military workplace. In D. Comer and G. Vega (Eds.) *Moral Courage in Organizations: Doing the Right Thing at Work*.
- Solomon, R.C. 1998. The moral psychology of business: Care and compassion in the corporation. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 8(3), 515-534.
- Treviño, L. K., and Youngblood, S. A. 1990. Bad apples in bad barrels: A causal analysis of ethical decision-making behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75(4), 378-386.
- Wang, C.S., Galinsky, A.D., and Murnighan, J.K. 2009. Bad drives psychological reactions, but good propels behavior: Responses to honesty and deception. *Psychological Science*, 20(5), 634-644.
- Zimbardo, P. 2007. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House.