

## **Building Moral Courage as a Professional Practice**

by

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Theoretical discourse to address issues, concerns, and ideas to improve ethics in the workplace have been robust, yet the demonstrative focus on compliance remains the norm (Copeland, 2003; Phillips, 2002; Verschoor, 2004; Moriarity, 2000). Current frameworks for organizational ethics typically base program efforts on regulatory controls, which tend to stimulate defensive posturing and reactionary measures to manage behavior. Such efforts take a narrow view of ethics, with the main focus to achieve stability through a legal baseline. If moral strength in the workplace is desired, a broader approach, one that goes beyond compliance, must be considered. A shift in how we frame organizational ethics is needed. Leaders who want to see moral strength embedded in managerial decisions and actions need to do more than prevent unethical behavior, they need to cultivate moral performance. This paper begins to address this concern by describing professional moral courage (PMC) and how it may be developed in the workplace.

To catalyze a shift in how we frame organizational ethics, this work draws upon the tenets of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship (POS). Positive psychology is described as the study of “conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104), and, as such, has direct application to organizational behavior. As a discipline, POS seeks to advance our understanding of what creates the best of human functioning in organizational contexts (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). A subdiscipline, positive organizational behavior (POB), has also been identified as the study and application of positive human strengths and capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement (Luthans, 2002). Scholars in these fields have recognized that organizational frameworks need to go

beyond defensive tactics driven by competition, control, and individualism that can serve to elevate self-interest (Irvin, 2002). To broaden and build organizational capacity we need to advance collective growth and development (Sekerka & Fredrickson, 2007). Therefore, if the goal is to help organizations establish moral strength, rather than focusing on compliance we need to understand the thoughts and actions of managers who actually engage in moral action. In so doing, we can help leaders establish contexts where moral strength, as exemplified by PMC in task action, is supported, developed, and exercised.

This chapter advances scholarship by describing moral courage as a process, understanding the dynamics of the effort as managers move to address their ethical challenges. To help facilitate PMC in practice, an expanded framework for organizational ethics is presented. In addition, an educational technique is described to help managers understand what supports or blocks their ability to proceed with PMC, and the importance of self-regulation which can support their moral agency.

### **Professional Moral Courage as a Process**

Peterson and Seligman (2004) refer to courageous efforts as virtues in action, depicting moral courage in a range of behaviors, and possessing a trait-like quality that makes it generalizable and stable over time. As a character strength, its application is used to achieve more than the absence of distress, breaking through baseline concerns of disorder and dysfunction (Peterson, 2000). Courage is also purported to be an emotional strength that involves “the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal” (Peterson & Park, 2004, p. 437). Unlike Peterson and his colleagues, who include different forms of bravery (mental and physical), perseverance, authenticity, and zest in their definition, this research treats moral courage as a professional practice. The aim of this research is to describe PMC as it unfolds in

the pursuit of forming and engaging in a moral response.

We know that there are countless influencers in decision-making efforts as people make a number of choices in the path of moral action. This includes impacts from social norms, values, emotions, and anticipated affect (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007; Steenhaut & Kenhove, 2006). To deal these factors, it is arguable that PMC is needed to maintain the will to proceed, in moving down this path. While PMC can be considered a trait or quality (Verschoor, 2003; Hesselbein, 2005; Pears, 2004), the way it emerges in managerial decision-making can be progressive and dynamic. While moral courage can be considered an attribute, in this chapter the interest is in describing it as a process. More specifically, what does it look like when professionals engage in moral action in the workplace?

Prior literature has highlighted moral courage as a management virtue (Harris, 1999; Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1998), describing it as an attribute that motivates and enables individuals to take the right course of action given the ethics of their profession (Sekerka & Zolin, 2005). Given that ethical challenges necessitate moral action, it is assumed that moral agency requires some level of moral courage if moral conduct is to be sustained. Prior studies of moral courage in the workplace seem to target those who speak out against ethical wrongdoing and feature injustice as the focal point for inquiry (Nielsen, 1989; Near & Miceli, 1995; Treviño & Victor, 1992). While acts of valor such as whistle-blowing require moral courage (Grant, 2002), the focus of this chapter is not on the one-time act, but on the progressive nature of PMC as a professional practice. Much like Walton (1986) argues, PMC is considered a practical action. This suggests that PMC can be applied to ordinary activities that can potentially help to create organizational cultures that possess moral strength.

To explicate PMC, according to Rest's (1986) theory of moral decision-making the action

sequence includes: a) recognition of the moral issue; b) making a moral judgment; c) establishing moral intent; and d) engaging in a moral response. PMC involves decision-making, so rather than viewing it as a single action, it is treated as a trajectory involving the progression of cognitive and affective elements. But as Rest (1986) suggests, if the person hopes to proceed with a moral action, they must first recognize the issue. Therefore, to engage in PMC the manager must experience some sort of ethical challenge, defined as: (1) recognition of a moral issue; (2) one's actions regarding this issue will have consequences for others; and (3) a choice is presented that engages one's volition (Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985). A description of PMC can therefore be derived by understanding what fuels effective moral decision-making when facing an ethical challenge in the context of managerial performance.

Prior research shows how professional roles can screen individuals from moral criticism, potentially obscuring them from responsibility (Wolgast, 1992). Therefore, it is essential that moral courage be explicated in terms of everyday task actions. It should be noted that the term professional used in this chapter refers to the profession of management. That said, the moral courage demonstrated by managers is not limited to one area of expertise. Thus, the term *professional* in PMC serves to describe it simply as a professional practice, one that can potentially be applied to a broader range of functionaries holding different types of managerial responsibilities. But to cultivate moral courage as a managerial practice, a description of the term is needed—one that is useful to people who influence and guide others, and may struggle with understanding how to engage in moral action.

In summary, by discerning how managers respond to ethical challenges with moral agency, a useful description of PMC can be created, which can be used to help develop the behavior as a management practice. A description will make the process of PMC clearer for organizational

applications; specifically, to facilitate education toward the development of moral strength in workplace settings. To advance this goal a qualitative study was conducted.

## **The Study**

**Participants.** Use of a military population was deemed appropriate for this research, given that officers' professional role and identity assumes their virtuous character in daily action. Having taken an oath to be moral as they accomplish their management duties, it was likely that this population would have experienced an ethical challenge and made some attempt to engage in a moral response. Subjects (N=45) held the management military rank of Lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander, or Commander in the U.S. Navy. The mean age of the subjects was 34.5 years and the sample was predominantly male (76.5%) and Caucasian (75.4%), with 11.1% African-American or Black, 4.7% Hispanic, and 8.8% other or mixed ethnicity. This study was part of a larger research initiative with the U.S. Naval Supply Corps.

**Procedure.** Subjects were asked to think of a time when they faced an ethical challenge at work and to describe how they responded, and what they were thinking and feeling at the time. Each critical incident interview (Flanagan, 1982) lasted approximately 1.5 hours and were audio recorded (confidentiality was assured). Transcripts produced 123 scenarios, as each person provided 2-3 incidents. At the end of each scenario the subject was asked if they engaged in a moral response. This resulted in a two subsamples: a) moral agents (n=81) and b) non-responders (n=42). The focus of this study was to describe core components of the moral agent subsample (thirty-five of the subjects were part of this group).

**Method.** As defined by qualitative analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a constant comparison method was used to identify the central ideas and preliminary themes for moral agency. This involved going back and forth between the transcripts to identify consistent

thoughts and actions present when managers moved to engage in moral action. In some cases a theme was present in both subsamples; here, prior theory on moral courage was consulted for theme selection. Once preliminary themes were identified, a codebook was created. A research assistant (RA) was trained to learn the codes and their definitions. The author and RA then independently coded ten randomly selected transcripts from the moral agent subsample. After some discussion and combining several codes, an inter-rater reliability of 98% was achieved. The remaining subsample was coded using the validated codebook, producing five core themes to describe PMC.

## **Results**

The description of PMC is presented by setting forth the five core themes. To do so, a variety of scenarios are included, with quotes used to provide evidence and illumination.

### ***Moral Agency***

To describe the first theme, we start with one manager recalling how his ship was docked in a foreign port and the local supplier wants to pay for a night out on the town for the ship's senior officers (the ward room). Upon hearing of the matter he sees this as an ethical issue and must confront the Captain (CO):

I made it clear that I thought that although the publications didn't necessarily say that he shouldn't do it, in light that it might be perceived that there was a conflict of interest, or that undue influence was going to be the result, it was not advisable. ...Initially he (CO) asked me to point to the directives—I don't know if he saw it as a challenge of his authority as the CO—but he asked me to clarify my position with regard to the regulations.

In this quote, the manager immediately engages in forming a moral response, reflecting his readiness and willingness to act. Moral agents are willing to pursue right action upon issue recognition, having the desire to do the “right” thing from the onset. Rather than debating

whether or not they should be involved, they assume responsibility for being part of the situation. They don't look for reasons to negate their involvement.

Cavanaugh and Moberg (1999) posit that moral courage is the consideration of right and wrong with a conscious choice to engage in the moral good. Given that the first principle of action is not the goal, but the decision to engage, moral agents seem to have already made that initial choice point, so they are ready for action when issues emerges. This is not to say that an "action" is always taken. Sometimes moral agents make a decision that it is best to pause, and gather more information, rather than to take action. However, those with PMC appear to have an automatic choice, or pre-determined "yes," regarding involvement and the desire to engage. This does not mean that it is without reservations, however; as depicted in this situation, where the manager must put aside his doubts to bolster his will:

Who was I to say...? I sort of put that behind me and went forward. I kind of used a past incident in addition to the training that we received, to again ground myself to consider the appearance of impropriety. I needed to bring it up to the Skipper (CO). So I just sort of took it and processed it in my mind. And said, if anybody was external to the situation, that could see all the factors, what would they see?

Like other moral agents, the quote reflects that despite the having the will, insecurities can still surface. Nevertheless, their volition appears to be part of a constant striving to achieve moral good. Miller (2005) suggests that consistency is essential to human flourishing and, with PMC, being primed for moral action is important if internal motivations to proceed down the moral decision-making path are to commence and be sustained.

When courage, as a voluntary act (Shelp, 1984), is linked with morality (the Latin root *mor* meaning custom, habit, or practice), the importance of the routine nature of making moral choices is revealed. By establishing the will to achieve moral goodness as a personal habit, it can potentially become more constant as a standard practice. This is notable in another scenario,

where the manager is pressured to give away government property to a dignitary. Here, we see the link between constant striving and moral action. In this situation reliability in right action is considered part of the officer's commitment to the organization and as feature of his managerial competency:

And the commitment is to lead by example and to learn all you can about a situation, and be consistent, and just really provide leadership from sunup to sundown. But it is a commitment...I wasn't about to break that trust. And that covenant. And the word covenant...meaning an agreement between two parties. I wasn't about to break that trust making an artificial scenario OK just because people wanted it.

As Solomon (1998) suggests, moral courage is consistently doing what one knows one ought to do. This consistency, visible through the moral agent's readiness to pursue right action, helps to form the first theme, described as: In the context of work performance, the manager consistently strives toward moral agency.

### ***Multiple Values***

Referred to as values, principles help people make judgments regarding the goodness or badness of an action (Davis & Frederick, 1984). This ability to determine right direction requires an internal choice to conform to the standards of moral behavior, as guided by character and conscience, which can be influenced by subjective rather than explicit criteria per se (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007). Managers are guided to judgment based upon their professional and organizational values, but also by tapping personal convictions of what is considered right from their own perspectives. Rather than acting only on physical evidence, perceived consequences, or in response to pressures, people apply their internal ethical system to support the will to achieve moral good. For example, as this manager reflects on his thought process, he looks to the law, its intention, and his role as a professional steward:

...look at the spirit of the rules and regulations in my position as a steward of the public trust, what is the spirit of the entire thing look like?

With PMC, managers work to align their personal, professional, and organizational principles of right and wrong in the course of determining right action (Carlson, Kacmar, & Wadsworth, 2002). To do so, they rely upon cognitive and emotional schemas (Abelson, 1981; Gioia & Poole, 1984) that contribute to their internal scripts for their various roles. These scripts support the application of principles and/or values that are ascribed to one's various value-identities (Gecas, 2000)—e.g., as a manager, officer, friend, husband, and so on. But in some cases, social norms or pressures to conform may actually go against or conflict with principled right action from one of these value-identities. For example, in this scenario the manager feels pressured to do something unethical to be a “team player.” He looks to personal principles to determine a moral response:

...that's what they were telling me up in the stateroom...you need to be a team player. And that's the truth, I need to be a team player, but NOT when there's an ethical situation of that nature on my mind. I'll be a team player as long as it doesn't compromise my integrity, and I have to purchase beyond what my ethical values can purchase. And even if I didn't think that NIS would have caught what I did, I still wouldn't have done it because I didn't think it was right. That means that I know in my mind that this was something that I should not be using those funds for.

This ability to call upon and use multiple value sets form the second theme, stated as: In the context of work performance, the manager draws on personal, professional, and organizational moral principles to determine what is right.

### ***Endures Threat***

The third theme reflects how those who engage in PMC are likely to face danger, anger, or fear with perseverance. Whereas physical courage requires physical bravery, to the extent that

PMC poses a potential threat to self, it requires character bravery. The person's status, position, identity, and/or character may be put at risk. Given the potential for threat to self, how does a person develop consistency in establishing the will to proceed? For most, PMC is unlikely to be an automatic response—it requires practice. To sustain such efforts, people need to be aware that their initial response may not be the desire to act.

To garner the desire they may look to some other aspect of their moral identity (Whitbourne, 1986). This may be fueled by internal scripts that bolster resolve, such as “even if I didn't feel like it,” or “no matter what happens.” As managers struggle to form their desires and reasoning, they must also work to sustain habits that support PMC in daily tasks. Routine efforts to maintain the behavior can fortify response actions toward becoming automatic. The crucial nature of continual practice is underscored when facing ethical challenges, because these situations may require fortitude in defying convention or authority. Kidder's (2005) treatise depicts moral courage as the “intersection between three conceptual fields: principles, danger, and endurance” (p. 73). This ability to endure despite fear (Rachman, 1990) is particularly important in hierarchical organizations, where principles of duty include adherence to upper-level command. This quote captures the difficulty in these situations:

...it was kind of like a no-man's land. Until he'd (the CO) made that decision not to go out, it was kind of lonely. Yeah, definitely it's not a comfortable zone to be in. But going back to what I said about having a feeling that I was grounded in...I was on solid ground in the decision I made...(but) it was definitely aloneness in knowing that the decision could go either way.

PMC requires that managers work to sustain their will as they deal with negative or social self-conscious emotions and the internal strife that may emerge. In another example, the manager feels the need to go against his CO who wants him to bend the rules about how pay will be disbursed. He is concerned about breaking the rules, yet he is also worried about the potential

risks involved in choosing not to obey orders:

I was very worried how it was going to affect my evaluations...The immediate concerns were for my future. How is he (CO) going to react to it? Not so much about my peers, but just is he going to retaliate?

A reoccurring issue in moral agents' scenarios was this fear of alienation if one reports the unethical actions of others. However, as presented here, the perception of such threats can be overcome by a supportive organizational culture:

I think people will be more hesitant to report unethical situations for fear. (It has to do with climate.) What I mean by command climate is that if your command is very supportive on ethical issues, and in doing the right thing because it's the right thing all the time, I think you're going to find more people inclined to report unethical issues.

The irony is that if senior officials help create the culture and they are the one engaging in unethical activities, then managerial resources must be that much stronger. Taken together, this culminates in the third theme, stated as: In the context of work performance, the manager proceeds with moral action, despite significant obstacles and the potential threat to self.

### ***Goes Beyond Compliance***

Those who engaged in a moral response to an ethical challenge seem to use a proactive approach. More specifically, they go beyond the desire to avoid unethical behavior and want to do more than abide by standards of compliance. Regulation theory (Higgins, 1998; 2000) has been used to show how ethical regulation orientations can be identified (Sekerka & Zolin, 2005). As applied to moral behavior, a prevention focus works to safeguard against failure, to ensure safety, and to address duty and responsibilities to maintain order and stability. While this approach is essential toward establishing norms, to create order and control that prevent unethical behavior, it is unlikely to support PMC in practice. A promotion focus, one that

incorporates moral aspirations, may help support the will to face an ethical challenge and engage in the moral decision-making path and to form a moral response. Moral agents appear to have an ability incorporate both orientations. For example, this manager looks to the rules, but also goes beyond them, working to ascertain right action by considering their “spirit” or intention. Here, he describes how acceptance of personal responsibility exceeds compliance:

...look at the spirit of the rules and regulations in my position as a steward of the public trust. What is the spirit of the entire thing look like? Could this have all been totally innocent? Absolutely. But in that specific point in time, I weighed the balance of appearance of impropriety versus hey, let's just play it safe.

Another manager describes his new role as ship’s Supply Officer, “I had to go in and look, and learn, and understand, and try to figure stuff out, whereas other guys come in and the rules are already written, processes are in place, and they just kind of take over.... I had to set it up clean, and it was my shop.” He finds he not only has to re-establish appropriate norms, but also establish buy-in to instill a “cleaned up” process, which shows a broader view of ethics per se. This is underscored by another manager, who refers to an ability to “step up to the plate” when necessary. He describes witnessing the Captain verbally abuse a seaman. He sees the need to take action, despite the fact that other senior officers are standing by:

...my immediate reaction was this is wrong. This is not right, what he's doing. And that no one was standing up to the Captain, including the command Master Chief. No one was saying anything. No one was trying to—not even the executive officer was trying to divert the situation to some more friendly environment, so to speak. So I felt that I had...that I had a responsibility to step up to the plate and say, ‘Hey, this is not right, why don't we take this offline and we can discuss this later.’

Sometimes going beyond compliance is expressed through compassion or empathy. In reflecting on his motivations, this manager puts himself in the other person’s shoes, taking a different perspective to derive his response:

So I weighed those things...am I going to be the department head's boy and do everything he says?... (Do I) actually practice what I preach?...I took that approach and put myself in his shoes, and if I was that young kid, what difference is it going to make in his career. What would he want? What would I want if I was in his shoes? And I would want my Division Officer to represent me and help me out with this situation?

This gives rise to the fourth theme of PMC, stated as: In the context of work performance, the manager goes beyond ethical duty as prescribed by rules, regulations, and compliance-based measures, aspiring to achieve moral action.

### ***Moral Goal***

Finally, the fifth theme addresses how moral agents are driven by virtuous ends (Kateb, 2003). In returning to the first situation, where the supplier wants to take the senior officers out for a night on the town, the manager's motives are to ensure a fair contract renewal process:

Contract renewal time came up. I couldn't tell the old man (CO) how to, what input he should make. But I knew whatever input he did make, based on that husbanding agent's (supplier) performance, it wasn't due to any one specific point in time, four or five weeks earlier, where he showed him a good time on the town.

In another example, the moral agent proceeds toward moral action, even it defies social norms. Suspecting his Senior Officer of having an extramarital affair (against regulations), he considers the larger implications:

Lead by example. Compliance with Navy regulations. Obviously, stopping this inappropriate behavior...it could have been an example for the rest of the ship that we will not tolerate this type of behavior...and perhaps it did break their relationship up and maybe I saved some people's marriages.

Similarly, this situation involves a senior officer's unethical behavior. In this case, it is an apparent drinking problem. In taking action, the manager states:

I was thinking about how he could possibly put himself or others into danger, compromise safety...he might have an accident...hurt himself, hurt people...I felt that I had to do something. (Speaking out) was obviously good leadership, lead by example, possibly it saved this individual's life, and other people, it brought the awareness that this does occur, and that there is a mechanism in place to report this...I didn't do this for personal gain, I did it more for trying to help the individual, because I felt that he did have an urgent problem, and maybe he didn't know how to get help.

As evidenced by the moral agents, managers with PMC have intentions based upon moral motivations. Thus, the final theme is stated as: In the context of work performance, the manager's response is based upon virtuous motives.

The results conclude with an integration of the themes, describing PMC as: *When faced with an ethical challenge in the context of work performance, the person consistently strives to achieve moral agency, by drawing upon personal, professional, and organizational moral principles. And, despite the potential threat to self, they go beyond compliance to achieve a moral action, engaging in a response based upon virtuous motives.*

## **Discussion**

With a description in hand, it is clear that having the will to engage is an essential first step for PMC. But the process is fraught with influences that may curtail a desire to proceed—at any time. Such challenges are likely to require cognitive and emotional endurance. To sustain one's commitment to right action, managers may have to control some thoughts and feelings, while bolstering others, to achieve their moral goal. This suggests that self-regulation, having an ability to restrain some desires while creating others in the process of establishing the motivation to act (Baumeister & Exline, 1999), is an important aspect of PMC as a practice. Positive psychologists have described how this capability is important when moving from issue awareness to the morally courageous action (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007). Self-regulation has been categorized by

leadership and management researchers as a competency, or an underlying characteristic, resource, or ability that can be useful in achieving effective performance (Boyatzis, 1982; Manz, 1986). In fact, it is considered so important to human functioning, that Baumeister and Exline (2000) propose that it may be the master virtue, inasmuch as the process can move individuals to overcome selfish impulses for the sake of others.

We know that current states or responses can be regulated, which include thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions. The ability to do so, however, requires the capacity to change one's initial response to a given situation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) so as to prevent negative outcomes or to achieve positive ones. Therefore, to habitually pursue acts of PMC, people must consistently work to postpone tendencies that deter involvement, bolster their will to engage, and manage their emotions (Salovey, Mayer, & Caruso, 2002; Goleman, 2004). This requires personal control and restraint, coupled with an ability to know when to act. To master this capability, people need development and practice.

### ***Building PMC in the Workplace***

To instill individual and organizational development, methods from change management can be employed to generate participation, reflection, and dialogue. Balanced experiential inquiry (BEI) is an educational intervention designed especially for ethics awareness and development, drawing upon two of the core change technologies to establish its theoretical foundation. Complemented by features gleaned from experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1985), BEI serves as a starting point to help promote organizational learning and to cultivate moral strength in the workplace.

Traditional interventions often begin with diagnostics to determine the source of dysfunction. From here, causal analyses and problem-solving efforts are deployed to improve the system

(Kotter, 1998). Alternatively, Appreciative Inquiry (AI; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003) is a method that draws on existing strengths within the system to instill change. Prior research shows that both techniques have merits (Sekerka et al., 2007), and each have value to promote ethics change (cf Van Vuuren & Crous, 2005). However, given that ethical risks pose a threat, the consideration of dysfunction is essential for a fully integrated ethics program. Therefore, rather than privileging the positive (Fineman, 2006), BEI builds the organization's moral foundation by leveraging growth from its existing practices—strengths and weaknesses alike. By weaving the two approaches together, a hybrid technique helps employees identify where ethical improvements are needed, while also encouraging them to build the capacity for moral strength.

BEI helps participants address workplace ethics by bringing forward their systemic realities. The process begins with paired discussions, and through these conversations and follow on facilitated group dialogue, the individual, social, and cultural factors that promote or curtail moral action are identified and examined (see Appendix). This activity helps foster relatedness, as people find similarities in others' circumstances. As participants connect through common experiences, issues that are kept private are more likely to be brought forward for discussion. By broaching the subject from two vantage points, a safe forum is established where ethical issues can surface and participants can learn what factors support or block their will to engage. When people reflect on their perceptions, response actions, and practices, unconscious motives can be brought forward. Participants self-identify how and why they decided to act, and in so doing, both thoughts and behaviors that drive routines and norms become visible. Thus, BEI gives managers a process where they can examine what blocks and supports their ability to proceed with PMC, and underscores the relevance of self-regulation. Unlike the classic case study method, BEI ushers forward incongruence that's in the system and makes exemplars explicit. As

an educational intervention, BEI establishes the integration of both the positive and negative as areas for ethics development and cooperative learning. This holistic approach is essential if positive psychology and its specialized disciplines hope to understand how disorder and dysfunction fit with achievement, aspirations, and performance (Linely et al., 2006).

As Aristotle suggested long ago, if you want to be moral, you need to act moral. By implication, if PMC is to become routine, professionals need to practice ethics through dialogue, reflection, and discovery. Because BEI fosters systems thinking and personal responsibility, participation is likely to support the practice of PMC. But without a broader systemic change to the organization's ethics culture, individual actions may be difficult.

### ***Creating a Proactive Ethical Culture***

As one officer suggested, the “command climate” helps to shape managers’ will to engage in moral action. Therefore, a proactive ethics culture—one that encourages autonomous moral action—is essential if PMC is to evolve as a workplace practice. To create cultures of moral strength, a focus on compliance needs to be expanded so that processes, norms, and performance support moral responsibility and action. While directives are typically outlined in corporate values and mission statements, systemic policies, processes, and practices, may not reflect a congruent message (Argyris & Schön, 1996). And, if stated values are left uncultivated, they can become devalued through social norms; especially when task accomplishment becomes more important than how the task is achieved. With organizational ethics typically framed from a legal standpoint, this underscores that managers should avoid unethical behavior rather striving to achieve moral action (Sekerka & Zolin, 2005). Rather than aspiring to create contexts that encourage PMC or the desire to develop moral agents, ethical performance is ensured by training requirements and adhering to compliance standards. Although organizational values and

professional identity aims are high, ethics can become objectified into rules that do not address or develop moral competencies in task actions. As a result, there may be limited motivation for employees to engage in behaviors that contribute to the organization's moral strength.

--Insert Figure 1 about here--

To address this concern, Figure 1 illustrates how organizational ethics can be expanded. Current efforts tend to exert control by imposing a legal moral minimum as the basis for ethical behavior. In this type of environment, the desire to engage in PMC is left up to the individual. Given the ethical challenges present in today's workplace, people must take an interest, get involved, and assume responsibility for their moral agency. But to do so they need organizational contexts that support such efforts. Proactive ethics complements the current compliance approach, integrating prevention and promotion.

Regardless of their current state, we know that organizations are not closed or static—they are living systems. Therefore, development is possible. Through systems dynamics, members can co-create change through engagement in processes that stimulate reflection, dialogue, and organizational learning. While systems thinking applied to organizational change (Senge, 1999) can help broaden the depth and breadth of ethical awareness, individual responsibility remains at the core of PMC. Yet we know that the self does not precede social experience, but develops out of it (Mead, 1950). As Werhane (2002) suggests, we are products of, characters in, and authors of our own experiences. Therefore, if we hope to advance moral strength in organizations, managers need to examine, evaluate, critique, and co-create the means to establish moral development in their units or departments, and within themselves. Going beyond the moral minimum means broadening and building the focus to include habits that support PMC as a practice.

## **Concluding Remarks**

For PMC to become habituated, individuals must maintain their will to engage in moral action. To develop this capability, managers can practice by becoming aware of and more open about the issues they face through reflection and dialogue. However, such efforts must be coupled with organizational processes, policies, and norms that support them. Otherwise, limited development will transpire. Without aligned goals, strategies, and performance standards, compliance-based routines are likely to remain, and expanded aims to promote moral strength are unlikely to be achieved. To help establish cultures that foster proactive ethics, educational interventions such as BEI may be useful. But if a shift in perceptions and behaviors is to be accepted and sustained, leaders must drive the change, which need to be followed by efforts that are cooperatively designed and operated by managers and employees.

Findings from this study were limited because of the single population studied. While the sample was representative of U.S. military commands, additional research must include more diverse populations and address potential gender and cultural differences. In addition, other professions and job roles must be considered, as well as different organizational types and structures. Despite these limitations, this chapter provides an important starting point toward understanding PMC as a management practice. Future research must continue to empirically study PMC, moral development, and moral competencies such as self-regulation that support moral agency in the workplace. Moreover, techniques such as BEI need to be tested to establish both short- and long-term impacts.

As Woreline (2002) and her colleagues explain, we will only achieve the highest levels of organizational performance by understanding the factors that foster people's abilities to respond to challenges with courage, and broaden their capacity for agency, connection, and change.

Leaders can begin the development of moral strength in their organizations by ensuring that moral performance is an expected and tracked objective. But how PMC is valued and rewarded as a practice will be revealed in how managers are supported before, during, and after their decisions to engage in moral actions. Proactive ethics will likely be determined by how leaders treat those who engage in PMC. Their response will send a message, which will bear an influence on the development of norms that shape the ethical culture of the entire organization.

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## Appendix

### *Introduction to Balanced Experiential Inquiry*

#### **Set up:**

1. Read the scenario and discussion questions.
2. Reflect on your experiences.
3. Share an example with your partner and answer the questions together.
4. Prepare to share your findings with the group.

#### **Scenario:**

Think back to a time in your career when you were faced with an ethical challenge. The situation may have presented a conflict between your personal, professional, and organizational values. It was likely that some level of tension was present when you worked to determine the right steps for action. For example, there may have been tension between doing what you thought you should do and what organizational norms suggested. It may have seemed as though all your options would impose undesirable consequences. Or perhaps you were torn, having to choose between two competing needs, both equally necessary. Perhaps there was a discrepancy between your personal ideology and the organization's goals, or what others were doing. In short, it was hard know what to do, how to best resolve the situation, and it was difficult to take action.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What was the ethical challenge?
2. What were you thinking and feeling?
3. What supported or curtailed your ability to engage in moral action?
4. What about the command climate supported or curtailed your taking action?

**Figure 1. Proactive Organizational Ethics**

|-----**Compliance Approach**-----|-----**Proactive Approach**-----|

Moral Weakness (Unethical Action)	Moral Minimum (Absence of Unethical Action)	Moral Strength (Professional Moral Courage)
Disobedience managed via enforcement	Obedience managed via control	Achievement managed via development
Does harm	Does no harm	Reduces harm to others
Avoidance Orientation	Prevention Orientation	Promotion Orientation