

**Developing the Capacity for Professional Moral Courage:
Lessons from those Facing Daily Ethical Challenges in Today's Military**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of professional moral courage in daily action. It results from a study to explore how military officers addressed ethical dilemmas that they encountered during their regular workplace activities. Interviews revealed fundamental skills that can help managers deal with everyday challenges. In describing these skills we discuss how exercising them can help people build moral courage in the workplace. We then set forth specific suggestions for leaders to help them create organizational cultures that build and support moral fortitude. At issue is the point that this form of courage can not be a presumed capability. Professional moral courage is a personal responsibility of every organizational member that must be continually practiced. Therefore, cultivating it is a task for leaders in all types of organizations.

Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit.

-Aristotle

Take a moment to recall a time when you faced a tough ethical dilemma at work. For those who recognize and accept these kinds of challenges, you know that deciding to do the right thing is difficult under the best of circumstances. While today's organizational leaders are calling for increased ethical behavior in employees' actions, our concern is that people may not know how to effectively resolve the ethical dilemmas they face in their everyday workplace activities. The difficulty, perceived or real, often requires the ability to exercise moral courage. What enables any of us to exercise such courage in our decision-making? How can leaders help make moral courage a professional norm, or at least a recognized daily imperative in their organizations?

In this article we begin to address these questions by examining what we refer to as professional moral courage and how it emerges in military officers' daily organizational life. While officers are the focus of this inquiry, the challenging situations presented represent similar ethical dilemmas that employees of any organization might experience; everything from excessive rule bending to inappropriate sexual activity. People in every type of organization face situations where rules and policies conflict with peer pressure and social norms. In such cases, organizational members, managers, and leaders typically experience competing values. This type of circumstance can influence the decision to move forward and engage in right action because perceptions that one's involvement may threaten their status, peer allegiance, or even career progression.

Evidence of this is represented by news headlines that regularly depict the unethical actions of corporate and government leaders: Eliot Spitzer (former governor of New

York), Andy Fastow (former Enron executive), Michael Sears (former CFO of Boeing), and Randy “Duke” Cunningham (former California Congressman) to name a few. Other ethics scandals, such as those at Abu Ghraib Prison and the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, make it very clear that all types of organizations are vulnerable to creating contexts where social pressures, arrogance, and the lack of moral awareness can influence good people to make bad and even unethical decisions. Phillip Zimbardo, known for the Stanford Prison Experiment, describes this as a psychological transformation of human character, depicting how ordinary people have the propensity to engage in acts of wrongdoing.¹ When people do not pay attention to the ethical considerations of their daily decision-making on an ongoing basis, it can impact the long-term success or failure of an organization and the personal lives of many.

The goal in this chapter is to better understand professional moral courage as a managerial competency and how to help create workplace environments that support effective moral decision-making. Our approach was to learn from those who strive to achieve exemplary conduct in their role as professional military officers. Research in this area is essential because as individuals in all types of organizations continue to face pressures to improve efficiency and to achieve maximum effectiveness, with a sustained emphasis on swift responses toward task accomplishment. Such pressures may, albeit unintentionally, influence managers and leaders to shortcut their decision-making process without giving sufficient attention to what objectives should be achieved and how they can be ethically accomplished. If people are expected to engage in moral action throughout the course of their professional duties they must know how to engage in effective moral decision-making.

We begin by defining professional moral courage and then present a study that describes competencies associated with effective moral decision-making and right action. We conclude by offering suggestions for how to create organizational cultures that support professional moral courage in daily organizational task actions.

PROFESSIONAL MORAL COURAGE

Mention the word ‘ethics’ in the workplace and people often associate the word with rules, regulations, and compliance-based responsibilities. Holding a narrow conceptualization of ethics without taking into account certain features of morality can easily be reduced to obedient rule adherence. This type of understanding of ethics does not enable organizational members to make decisions when there are no rules, when rules conflict, and when inner moral fortitude is needed to determine right action. We believe that more than an understanding of the rules and their intent is required for ethical decision-making.

We agree that ethics has to do with obeying the rules (letter) and understanding and addressing their purpose (spirit), but we also believe that morality must complement workplace ethics because it often requires reasoning and behaving according to values and the application of principles that go beyond self-interest.² Therefore, we contend that moral courage is required to engage in sustained ethical thinking and action as one engages in their work, especially when influential forces such as social norms make alternatives seem reasonable or acceptable. We refer to this capability as demonstrated in organizational life as *professional moral courage* (PMC).

Those with PMC may be characterized as doing what they know they ought to, even in the face of a moral challenge.³ We conceptualize PMC as underlying the decision to

engage in right action given the ethical standards of one's profession, and then displaying the moral strength to persevere in this path of action despite its potential negative consequences, including negative emotions, risk, difficulty, or threat to self. In short, personal needs become secondary to doing what is right.

Members of the military profession have a special duty to act with PMC because they are given the authority to apply force on behalf of society.⁴ Military professionals in the armed forces of the United States are required by law to follow certain explicit and implicit rules beyond what ordinary morality requires.⁵ This status empowers military leaders to initiate actions that may constrain others' fundamental rights, and potentially cause death or destruction. This authority stems from the principles and values manifest in the Constitution, to which military leaders pledge their oath of allegiance. Former Secretary of the Navy Gordon England affirmed the association between the military, the Constitution, and PMC when he said, "At the end of the day, the military is the ethical standard the nation looks up to."⁶ We view the military as responsible not only for the protection of the country's citizens and its borders, but also to preserve and enact moral principles in their actions.

Military ethicist James Toner suggests that if you recall any recent scandal involving a moral failure in the military you will find at its core a leadership failure.⁷ He underscores the essential nature of leaders living by their word and deed and claims that any program in virtue education depends upon the commander. We suggest that this responsibility applies to their everyday personal actions and that it is a leadership obligation to educate others on how to engage in exemplary moral conduct on a daily basis.

PRACTICING PROFESSIONAL MORAL COURAGE

Having PMC is deemed an essential component of organizational behavior and leadership. As evidenced by the ongoing parade of unethical actions in the workplace, its presence is often lacking. These concerns led to a proactive move by the U. S. Navy, with the creation of the *Ethics in Action Education and Research Program* sponsored by the Supply Corps. The initiative began with an inquiry conducted with junior officers, with a goal to better understand what serves to promote right action in the course of conducting one's daily activities. As middle managers in the organization, junior officers face demanding challenges that cross hierarchical boundaries. These officers must learn to deal with concerns, issues, and ethical dilemmas that involve people who are both junior and senior to them. During this early period in their career, they observe leader behaviors and, combined with their personal experiences, begin to hone the PMC they are expected to demonstrate as they progress in rank advancement. The study was designed to address this research question: *What personal competencies foster PMC when individuals face an ethical dilemma in the workplace?*

The study. Interviews were conducted with thirty-five junior officers, asking them to describe a time when they faced an ethical dilemma at work and how they responded to the situation. Through content analyses, the interview transcripts produced 98 scenarios (each officer produced 2-3 scenarios) that were sorted into key categories. The most frequent ethical dilemmas related to 1) *Rule bending to accomplish a task* (25%), 2) *Inappropriate use of funds* (13.9%), and 3) *Rule bending to accommodate senior officer's request* (11.1%) (see Table I).

--Insert Table I. about here--

We identified those who demonstrated PMC in their decision-making process by coding for the presence of a) striving for moral good, b) going beyond adherence to regulations and drawing upon moral principles, c) being faced with significant obstacles, and d) being confronted with a threat to self. This depiction of PMC by participants was consistent with academic literature as previously described. We then coded for the presence of personal skills that facilitated the moral decision-making process with a progression toward engagement in right action using the qualitative method of thematic analyses.⁸ We titled these features *personal governance practices*, which were represented by the following competencies: a) emotional awareness, b) reflective pause, c) self-regulation, and d) self-awareness. We describe them and add sample quotations to illustrate and add clarity to the findings.

Emotional Awareness: Because emotions and cognition are intertwined it is problematic to separate them.⁹ Emotions contain important signals that influence the cerebral process of moral decision-making.¹⁰ Affect can play a critical role in motivating or hindering the choice to engage in PMC. In our study, the emotions that junior officers 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 experienced a sense of confusion, agitation, or helplessness, often accompanied by a feeling of personal harm and some emotional discomfort or distress. When these emotions were felt, not ignored, repressed, or sublimated, but rather experienced and thoughtfully reflected upon, these officers seemed to be enabled by their emotional awareness rather than being blocked or thwarted. It appears that this capacity of being aware of one’s emotions allows the person to

commence coping and potentially self-regulate, which enables them to proceed with their decision-making process.

This quote highlights how an officer became aware of his emotions and 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 officer 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 emotions are not viewed as distractions or suppressed, they can serve as agents in promoting PMC and facilitating effective moral decisions. This competency was complemented by the ability to engage in a self-imposed reflective pause.

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 silent 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 reflection periods. It is as though the time-out helps people discern options and garner informed momentum toward moral action. Individuals used this period to consider different views, while they work to gather more information about the rules or other particulars regarding the details of the situation at hand. One officer outlined a plan to qualify for a warfare pin by cutting corners. He explained what 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."

Professional moral courage is bolstered through reflection as options are generated for moral action in the early states of a decision-making process. Taking time to reflect often alters, overrides, or postpones some initial reactions while also targeting responses for appropriate use. When applied as a daily habit, this reflection may actually serve as a portal for personal governance practices that lead to self-regulation.

Self-regulation: Initial reactions to ethical challenges require emotional awareness and reflection. But to habitually pursue right action and to manage and address tough moral decisions, individuals must balance their reactions, knowing how to manage responsibilities with desires for various goals and the possible means for achieving them, as they decide whether to postpone action or to engage in it. This requires restraint coupled with an ability to move forward despite the perception of negative impacts to self. It can be particularly difficult when peers or leaders are the ones engaged in questionable activities, or if they are asking an individual to engage in action that he or she believes may be morally unsound.

One individual described a captain's behavior as starting out as just inappropriate phone use. Over time, however, the improprieties escalated to include 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 individual eventually realized that his delayed engagement 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 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 if 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, withholding the impulse to act immediately, but also knowing when to proceed.

Many of the individuals interviewed expressed the thought that they should have acted sooner, but their respect, appreciation, or care for the individual involved, or a false sense of loyalty to command, served to inhibit action and self-regulation, at least initially. Those 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.”*

This scenario underscores how PMC comes from within, an inner strength and compass that provides motivation and direction, but often develops through personal struggle. Individuals must be willing to demonstrate moral fortitude, even when those around them, including leaders and peers, do not. Such self-control has been regarded as the moral muscle, in that an inner directive to alter one’s immediate responses and

redirect them toward the good of others is a cornerstone of virtuous behavior.¹¹ In rare cases some may apply self-regulation naturally, but there is enormous potential for further development in most people. Quieting one's impulse to react, then reflecting upon and managing immediate thoughts and feelings, can begin a course of personal development marked by habits of moral strength.

Self-awareness: 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. That is, morally mature persons appear to think through the consequences to them and others both in the case where they act and fail to act, and the emotions, evaluations, and thoughts so generated serve to influence decisions and then action. Many officers expressed the thought that one must know where their moral line is.

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 officer realized he needed to "draw the line" sooner. Having thought through positive and negative consequences of acting and not acting and developing conscious awareness of where that line is before an event arises can help individuals to engage in acts of PMC when an event occurs. Perhaps more importantly, making sure each person locates that personal line above the rules and regulations, so that a misstep does not mean immediate infraction, is an imperative for personal growth that the organization must build into its rules, policies, and procedures. Among other ways, the organization can foster such growth through educational training (e.g., by use of cases, role-playing, experiential learning exercises, coaching, regular feedback, periodic peer-group discussions,

rewarding exemplary behavior, etc).

For military personnel, developing self-awareness may be difficult because of the robust publicly presented self-esteem that is a central component of their professional identity. When unbalanced, an inflated self-image can lead to excessive pride, overzealous expectations, and may even deplete their motivation to engage in right action. Furthermore, excessive pride may block individuals from seeing their vulnerabilities. Displays of excessive pride make people around the prideful person uncomfortable and ultimately lead to a breakdown in communications and solidarity. An accurate perception of self is an essential ingredient in maintaining an honest balance of authenticity and humility, along with self-assurance. Introspection is needed—continuous self-monitoring to garner an ongoing understanding of personal motives.

INSTILLING PROFESSIONAL MORAL COURAGE

In our investigation, we also examined efforts to address PMC in current naval training. Our review of various programs and initiatives revealed several trends:

1. There is a focus on compliance and the prevention of wrongdoing, rather than the promotion and encouragement of moral action, per se.
2. There is limited if any dialogue across ranks about ethical issues.
3. Personal development is viewed more as a “check-the-box” process, rather than an ongoing educational forum that has direct application to everyday decision-making and behavior.
4. Knowledge about how to create moral environments, where people are motivated to act with PMC by choice, is limited.

Apart from the in-depth treatment provided at the U.S. Naval Academy through the *Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership*, efforts to educate Navy leaders in ethical conduct tend to focus on training rather than education.¹² That is, the Navy tends to focus

on ensuring that information is disseminated and known, but there is limited emphasis placed on affirming understanding, adoption, and application of the underlying values and principles that comprise PMC and resolving conflicts among these when they occur. We believe that ongoing education, rather than training alone, is vital in helping individuals move beyond behavior that seeks only to meet the moral minimum. Given these concerns, we considered what might assist leaders in creating environments where moral excellence becomes the clear and compelling norm—for themselves and their staff.

DEVELOPING ETHICAL LEADERS

Regulations that provide the guidelines for people to achieve the moral minimum, serve as a deterrent to wrongdoing. When coupled with the application of personal governance practices, organizational members have a good starting point for ethical action. Yet leadership is essential to establish the organizational cultures where communities of moral strength can grow and thrive. The department, unit, or command environment demonstratively influences culture, norms, and ultimately behavior. Even if individuals possess strong values and principles, they can be compromised when the boss or senior officials engage in unethical behavior. This officer describes a case in point, when his superior was engaged in an inappropriate behavior of mixed gender fraternization:

I knew it was unethical. I could have acted upon it—it was my duty to do that. But I failed to do that duty, only because it was common knowledge. All my beliefs and values that I carried into the service were somewhat compromised because of this. I chose to do nothing.

Rules and regulations are similar to locks on doors—they provide some protection, but alone do not promote good deeds. We see that even values can be compromised when

leadership wavers. The moral climate within a military command is driven from the top. When it is lacking, locks are broken and the door is kicked in; moral weakness often results. Therefore, leaders must consistently and proactively model exemplary behavior.

A common concern for junior officers is that they struggle with conflicting demands between professional obligations, demands of selfless service, and command preferences. These concerns are hard to weigh when coupled with pressures from senior officers to bend the rules. In such cases, clarity regarding where the line is drawn and what is the appropriate range of rule interpretation is difficult. Under these types of circumstances, moral decision-making tends to be driven more by the command climate than by personal values. When a senior officer was engaged in inappropriate conduct, his junior officer said:

I looked the other way. I felt that because it was common knowledge that this was occurring, that people in more senior positions that knew about this should have acted on this. If they weren't going to do anything about it, then why should I report this? I just kind of rationalized it in my head, that this was acceptable behavior on board this ship.

Officers in similar situations might refrain from action because they believe that the silence maintained by more senior officers, who they believe were aware of the inappropriate conduct, not only condoned it but would think less well of anyone who spoke out against it.

To address these concerns a more focused moral development program is needed, one that provides education and dialogue to reach every level. Leaders must look beyond current prevention-based approaches, by nurturing and promoting the moral foundation of members through personal development. In addition, leadership must also set the standard, as one officer described, “*Open forums among both senior and junior*

personnel along with forums with just peers would be beneficial...junior officers learn from senior officers and their respective experiences.” Senior officials need to be reminded that they have a responsibility to set the example—they are being watched very carefully. Another officer stated, *“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.”* Support for PMC, to act in such cases, needs to be communicated in both policy and practice.

Therefore, education and dialogue must continue at every level of the organization. The idea that PMC is not just an expectation, but a pinnacle responsibility of leadership must be instilled throughout the professional development pipeline. It is also important to openly address the impact of appearances and perceptions of impropriety. Whether true or not, if actions are perceived as less than exemplary, they can cultivate apathy and potentially devalue engagement in right action. Interventions to instill moral strength cannot mirror or simply escalate past approaches that use methods based solely on enforcement.

ORGANIZATIONAL ETHICAL HEALTH

The implications of our study can contribute to the enhancement of ethical health in any organization. To begin, leaders initiate and cultivate conversation and dialogue within their own departmental communities. Identify where the ethical risks and moral conflicts reside in the path of objective achievement. Explicitly point out and advocate what can and should be done in such cases. Discuss situations that lead to ethical

dilemmas and discuss what promoted or blocked effective moral engagement. Given the participants' general comments and our collective observations, we offer several recommendations for leaders to consider:

1. Get to know your people personally. Apply this knowledge to develop rapport and trust and to form an authentic understanding for each member of your department. Encourage and reward forthrightness.
2. Develop team cohesiveness, creating interdependencies through inclusiveness and shared ownership of task success (integrating a team versus personal gain focus).
3. Model exemplary professionalism and demonstrate personal integrity in all actions. You are watched and emulated constantly. Your actions are watched and serve as announcements of the organization's values. Your actions convey: This behavior is to be repeated.
4. Create a collaborative dialogue across ranks about ethical challenges. Establish an ongoing discussion about the issues that your people face. Discuss openly how you have dealt with these concerns and how you expect your subordinates to act.
5. Include ethics into systemic processes: conduct an annual ethics audit, where ethical risks reside, create initiatives to create ethics change, establish performance criteria that exemplify the worth of moral action in daily action. Institute regular group discussions of potential and actual ethical breaches and exemplary behavior.
6. Address moral breaches swiftly. Condemn unethical performance with equity and reward moral excellence with equal gusto and consistency. Set high expectations—demand PMC with respect for all people, positions, and ranks.
7. Make your behavior overt; your values and expectations visible; secrecy is self-defeating and can breed contempt.
8. Make crystal clear the responsibility to uphold the organization's core values and to report violations. Encourage people to support each other when engaging in PMC. Make connections of everyday organizational values to higher-order values manifest in the organization's long-term mission.

An organizational cultural environment where a command applied some of these recommendations found the following junior officer working in a community where PMC and responsible influence became a shared social norm—where moral strength was expected from the entire crew:

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.

Leadership is the cornerstone for PMC throughout an organization. While each individual must engage in personal governance practices, leaders must set the example and create the environment. To help organizational members make tough moral decisions, leaders must provide every member of their team with sustained support and professional development that will bolster their ability to proceed with right action.

NOTES

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³ Robert C. Solomon, "The Moral Psychology of Business: Care and Compassion in the Corporation," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1998): 515-534.

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⁵ Manuel M. Davenport, "Moral Constraints on the Conduct of War" *Prospectives on the Professions* 16, no. 2 (1997, http://ethics.iit.edu/perspective/pers16_2spr97_2.html accessed May 26, 2008).

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¹⁰ Leslie E. Sekerka and Richard P. Bagozzi, "Moral Courage in the Workplace: Moving to and from the Desire and Decision to Act," *Business Ethics: A European Review* 16, no. 11 (2007):132-142.

¹¹ Roy F. Baumeister and Julie J. Exline, "Virtue, Personality, & Social Relations: Self-control as the Moral Muscle," *Journal of Personality* 35, no.1 (1999): 1165-1194.

¹² U.S. Naval Academy *Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership*, <http://www.usna.edu/Ethics/> (accessed May 26, 2008).

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

| Ethical Dilemma Types* | Total |
|---|--------------|
| Rule bending to accomplish a task | 25.0% |
| Combination** | 13.9 |
| Inappropriate use of funds or missing funds/resources | 12.0 |
| Rule bending to accommodate senior officer's request | 11.1 |
| Inappropriate sexual activity*** | 10.2 |
| Stealing | 7.4 |
| Drug or alcohol abuse | 6.5 |
| Cheating/lying | 5.6 |
| Harassment (not sexual) | 4.6 |
| Payoffs, bribery, or inducements | 3.7 |

*Each officer provided 2-3 examples producing a total of 98 scenarios.

**A distinctive category, representing a situation when 2 or more ethical issues combine to form what was perceived as a single problem (e.g., rule bending and alcohol abuse). If coded as combination, it was not counted elsewhere.

***Includes homosexuality, extra-marital affairs, and sexual harassment.