Developing Moral Imagination in Leadership Students

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Abstract

Imagination is the exercise of generating new and novel mental images. Because of its utility for the arts, it is primarily thought of as a purely aesthetic tool. And yet, as a cognitive orientation to the world, imagination has much to offer business leaders. Imagination shifts leaders away from ingrained ways of thinking; it emphasizes reframing existing situations, moving beyond constraining mental models, and formulating innovative responses. In short, imagination is the critical cognitive link connection between *what is* and *what might be*. This application brief describes a module designed to develop *moral imagination* in leadership students in Gonzaga University's Masters in Organizational Leadership Program. It outlines the use of popular film – in this case, the classic Woody Allen (1989) film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* – to help students identify ethical events, assess various viewpoints concerning these events, and then practice reframing the events using moral imagination.

Introduction

Imagination is often regarded as fanciful, unreal, or purely aesthetical thinking. Yet, imagination in a leadership context is a cognitive orientation to the world that emphasizes engaging alternative perspectives and creating new possibilities for action. In this way, imagination allows leaders to step outside of preconceived or ingrained mental models to develop the novel and innovative. As Wenger (1998) noted, imagination is "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176). Because of its focus on reframing and refocusing our images of self and environment, imagination is a powerful transformative leadership tool. And yet, as Wenger (1998) cautions, developing imagination "involves a different kind of work of the self – one that concerns the production of images of the self and images of the world that transcend engagement" (p. 177). As such, imagination is a difficult skill to teach. It requires unique pedagogical approaches to help individuals

identify existing mental models while also engaging new ways of knowing and seeing.

It is particularly important to explore imagination in the context of moral leadership in light of ongoing scandals that have unveiled unethical practices across business, non-profit, medical, public service, athletic, education, religious, and other organizations. These scandals have contributed to diminished trust and credibility. Stakeholders are progressively demanding increased leadership transparency and understanding in how organizations operate and morally deliberate between ethical choices.

This application brief outlines a module designed to develop moral imagination in students attending a graduate organizational leadership program. The brief first defines the imaginative process and its utility for leadership. It then describes a training module utilizing a classic Woody Allen (1989) film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, to explore ethical situations that arise in everyday life and to demonstrate how dominant worldviews impact ethical decision-making. Finally, it describes the role that imagination plays in helping individuals reframe and "re-see" events to attain better, more robust ethical decisions. Throughout, we hope to show how leadership training can be brought to life through hands-on engagement with aesthetic tools such as popular film.

We use film to explore, teach, and develop moral imagination for many of the same reasons laid out by Graham, Sincoff, Baker, and Ackerman (2003) in their use of film to teach Kouzes and Posner's (2002) five effective leadership practices. Film is an ideal medium to teach leadership concepts and normative theories of ethics because it creates a universal experience for participants (Graham, Ackerman, & Maxwell, 2004) who are predominantly adults and represent a wide range of industries. Most importantly, film provides a strategic platform to introduce principles of androgogy and the most efficacious methods for adult learning. It offers a fictional situation that engages the adult learner to (a) learn about a concept from various learning styles, (b) integrate previous knowledge and experience, (c) engage in cognitive and physical participative learning, and (d) apply gained knowledge to a hypothetical or fictional incident (Sheal, 1989).

Imagination: A Critical Leadership Skill

Poor leadership may in part be described as a lack of imagination – holding too firmly to the world *as it is* without exploring the world *as it might be*. As Werhane (2006) noted, "Sometimes companies get into trouble not because they deliberately meant to do the wrong thing…but because they did not question what they were doing or challenge the mind sets and methodologies with which they thought through issues" (p. 404). In other words, leaders may get caught in narrow perceptions or rigid conceptual schemes and mental models. Mental models, though useful in helping us recognize and order the world, can also

provide a narrow selective filter of experience. These models may be incomplete, biased, or distorted. They may also be unrecognized; leaders may not even be consciously aware that they are operating out of an existing mental model that permits only certain types of decisions (Werhane, 1999).

Imagination allows one to categorize, sort, frame, and extrapolate from existing events while also predicting alternate outcomes. In leadership, this imaginative process may contribute to revising the meaning of an event, reinterpreting options or alternatives, and reframing purpose in the larger context of a given event. In short, imagination is the ability to challenge existing operative mental models in order to find, and potentially use, new ways of framing and making decisions (Werhane, 1999). It is the capacity to see the world differently – "to envision and evaluate new mental models that create new possibilities, and the capability to reframe the dilemma and create new solutions in ways that are novel, economically viable, and morally justifiable" (p. 93).

This type of imaginative reframing is particularly relevant in ethical decision making since individuals encountering moral situations neither reason solely on the basis of universal rules, nor on the basis of unconstrained and non-rational means (Johnson, 1993). Moral reasoning is more complex than simply choosing and applying moral law or relying solely on personal or culturally-mediated opinions. Instead, as individuals assess ethical situations, they use an imaginative process to (a) bring them in contact with their own mental models of a given situation; (b) identify other possible models of the situation; and, (c) select the most appropriate model and apply moral reasoning to the situation.

Moral imagination "helps one to disengage from a particular process, evaluate that and the mindsets which it incorporates, and think more creatively within the constraints of what is morally possible" (Werhane, 2002, p. 34). Operating in three distinct dimensions, moral imagination includes both retrospective and prospective cognition. An individual first engages in reproductive imagination as they self-reflect and become aware of dominant mental models. Secondly, they contribute to or produce imagination by developing new possibilities that are not context-dependent and may use alternate mental models. Finally, becoming aware of dominant mental models and considering new ways of thinking about possibilities that are not context dependent contributes to creative imagination and the ability to evaluate the original context to consider new possibilities in making a decision.

Exploring Moral Imagination in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

The use of case studies is often integrated to retrospectively evaluate the imaginative process in ethical decision-making and to teach organizational ethics. A pedagogical technique which integrates similar social learning is the use of film (Bandura, 1997). Woody Allen's (1989) *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is a masterful culmination of various characters struggling to live what Socrates called the

"good life" or a life worth living. Even the underlying foundation and plot of the film has elements of the imaginative process inherent in all of the leading characters who are struggling with personal identity, love, family, relationships, religion, and moral decisions. This dark comedy centers on a central question of how the obsession with watching and being watched – judging and being judged – impacts the lives of two men. The lives of these two men are unveiled separately on screen as they both consume themselves with the place of morality in the world, all while overlooking their own moral lapses. The film brilliantly illustrates the role of moral imagination in the lives of Dr. Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau) and Cliff Stern (Woody Allen) and particularly their struggle of recognizing, reacting to, and organizing information in the context of morality.

Learning Objectives

The module has two primary learning objectives that contribute to the development of moral imagination: (a) Integrate fictional scenarios presented in the film to frame ethical systems and (b) Understand the imaginative process as a method of connecting ethical situations with appropriate ethical responses

Learning Objective 1: Integrate fictional scenarios presented in the film to frame ethical systems.

Context and Theoretical Background: As the film director, Woody Allen intertwines personal and family relationships and social events to convey the complexity of humanity and to show how individuals sacrifice or violate individual rights or legitimate moral expectations. Characters on screen encounter a number of ethically binding situations and morally disengage from a self-regulating process (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement allows the individual to deny the self-regulatory mechanisms or ethical foundation that would otherwise steer individuals towards ethical standards. Bandura proposed that moral disengagement happens by: (a) cognitively restructuring behavior through the use of moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison; (b) minimizing one's role in the harmful behavior by displacing or diffusing responsibility, disregarding or distorting consequences; and, (c) focusing on the target's unfavorable acts by dehumanizing or projecting blame. Bandura conceptualized "moral disengagement" as an anticipatory process that occurs prior to allowing an unethical behavior to occur. Disengagement or inability to cognitively restructure and challenge dominant mental models to deliberate and reconsider alternative modes of action is clearly manifested film characters like Judah, Dolores, Jack, Cliff, and Lester.

Complex situations on screen introduce moral conflicts and outcomes that provide teachable moments. The film captures the attention of students and engages them in recognizing that a moral problem exists in a given situation and that moral principles apply to decisions made by the characters. Sparks and Hunt (1989) refer to ethical sensitivity as the capacity to recognize that a decision-making

situation has ethical implications. In a meta-analysis review of studies about behavioral ethics in organizations, Trevino, Weaver, and Reynolds (2007) highlight moral awareness and the ability to identify an issue as ethically significant as a critical first step towards initiating ethical decision making and ethical behavior.

Discussion Points: There are a number of valuable discussion points for consideration.

- What has contributed to worldview formation in the lives of various lead characters? How did Judah develop dominant mental models throughout life and how did these ways of thinking contribute to his deliberative process in making morally bound decisions?
- Explain how various lead characters morally disengage prior to unethical behavior.
- The notion of freedom routinely emerges throughout the film. How does one decide the right thing to do? Is obedience enough as in the context of Judah's religious upbringing and what is the role of moral imagination in their lives? How do the characters deliberate between competing interests with competing choices?

The discussion is designed to expose the complexity of ethical engagement and the range of possible personal and relational reactions. The film challenges the typical notion that there is an objective one size fits all response to complex ethical decisions. In fact, it demonstrates that individual ways of seeing encourage different ethical responses, many of which can be appropriate or inappropriate to a given situation. By engaging in discussion with one another, students begin to see that different mental models allow for different ethical responses. In doing so, they begin to engage the concept of personal framing of events and how those frames can be challenged to achieve better ethical solutions.

Learning Objective 2: Understand the imaginative process as a method of connecting ethical situations with appropriate ethical responses.

Context and Theoretical Background: The complex relationships on screen lead film characters to various immoral decisions and moral conflicts. Such conflicts introduce the foundation of cognitive deliberation first introduced by Dewey (1922) in his reference to the imaginative process that requires "a dramatic rehearsal" of competing lines of action. Students study fictional characters on screen, identify their narrowed interpretation of events, and begin to understand the way that mental models that limit consideration of alternative courses of action. The film scenes are strategically connected to isolate the relevance of moral imagination in the lives of fictional characters that are presented with opportunities to consider a broad range of alternative choices rather than their narrow or one dimensional view that govern imagination. It is at this point that students begin to enter the fictional lives of film characters and begin to produce,

what Cooper (1999) calls a "movie in our minds with realistic characters, a believable script, and clear imagery" (p. 24).

Overall, the module encourages students to understand ethical decision-making as an imaginative process that brings a person in contact with a personal frame of a given situation, other possible framings of the situation, and one's personal, traditionally forged definitions of moral concepts. This constructive, imaginative activity is based on perception, personal experience, and individual understanding of dominant moral concepts (Johnson, 1993). Instead of disengaging from the situation and formulating a response on the basis of external rules, moral imagination emphasizes engagement in the social process by allowing a response to be evoked through the connection to that experience.

Discussion Points: There are a number of valuable discussion points for consideration that arise by viewing the film in a sequence of five consecutive scenes and then breaking away for discussion clarity. It is helpful to utilize consecutive intermissions to identify philosophical worldviews on screen, and engage students in a discussion of the following key points related to moral imagination:

- Rabbi Ben explains to Judah the notion of good and what is lawful – "Without the notion of good, everything is lawful". How do lead characters in the film vacillate between reproductive, productive and creative imagination in experiencing the notion of good and a life worth living?
- Imagine new possibilities that are not context-dependent and may use alternate mental models.
- The film introduces the notion that we define ourselves by the choices we make. How did Lester and Halley redefine themselves by imagining new possibilities and alternate models? Evaluate the original context and the new possibilities in order to make a decision (Werhane, 1999).
- The film ends with Woody Allen (Cliff) and Martin Landau (Judah) discussing the perfect murder or the perfect Hollywood story. What is the imaginative role in this concluding dialogue and is it morally grounded?

Conclusion

Imagination is more than the whimsical spark of creativity; it is an integral skill that allows leaders to move beyond embedded ideas while creating new – and meaningful – change. Likewise, moral imagination is a powerful method of examining existing ways of thinking, engaging with other worldviews, and reframing ethical situations. The use of film, particularly Woody Allen's (1989) *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, is a provocative and engaging way to bring ethics to life and allow students to practice moral imagination. Through engaging the film and one another, students are allowed to "see and re-see" events through different lenses and alternative ethical systems. In the end, students will have gone beyond static frameworks and rote methods of ethical decision-making and will use a far

more powerful tool: the ability to *imagine* new ways of responding and acting in ethically challenging situations.

Because of its ability help both reassess past decisions and envision new possibilities, imagination is of great value in moving leaders beyond what is culturally or situationally prescribed (Werhane, 1999). It is also the linchpin of innovation – allowing creative approaches to existing practices. Wenger (1998) summed up the far reaching implications of imagination for leaders, stating, "It is through imagination that we see our own practices as continuing histories that reach far into the past, and it is through imagination that we conceive of new developments, explore alternatives, and envision possible futures" (p. 178).

Students leave the class with a new method of seeing ethical situations and challenging their own modeled responses. With a new perspective on ethical decision-making and a method of reframing, students are given a powerful tool to aid in their exercise of leadership.

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