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JOSEPHINE GANU

MORAL COURAGE: THE ESSENCE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND FOLLOWERSHIP

Abstract: Most discussions on ethical leadership emphasize the importance of personal integrity, visible role modeling, and actual enforcement of ethical behaviors in the workplace. Nonetheless, organizational leaders and followers alike regularly encounter issues and pressure that require not only ethical leadership but also moral courage. Accordingly, this study used a mixed method to examine typical ethical situations encountered by organizational members in the workplace, the extent to which employees can exercise courage, and the factors that impede their moral actions. The results show that the majority of organizational members are unable to translate their moral beliefs and judgment into real moral action in the workplace. Organizations must, therefore, seek ways and means of creating and supporting moral courage.

Keywords: *moral courage, ethical leadership, moral action, ethical principles*

Introduction

Africa likely brings to mind mixed thoughts–corruption, ethnic violence, poverty, AIDS, malaria—but at the same time, Africa is the home of quality natural resources. Many have attributed the challenges in Africa to lack of ethical leadership; however, underneath ethical leadership is the moral courage to face those challenges. Most discussions on ethical leadership emphasize the importance of personal integrity, visible role modeling, and actual enforcement of ethical behaviors in the workplace. Nonetheless, organizational leaders and followers alike regularly encounter ethical issues and constant pressure, which require moral courage. Accordingly, having positive attributes means little without moral courage to confront unethical behaviors and questionable practices.

For the ethical leader, courage is essential in fulfilling the moral obligations in daily dealing justly with employees and other stakeholders. Followers, on the other hand, need moral courage to question unethical practices or challenge authority through constructive criticism when the leader/system is in the wrong.

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Kelly (1992) argues that followers should be independent critical thinkers and actively engaged in their organization. Hence, employees must view their role as active participants in the organization.

Why do some leaders make decisions that take into consideration only their interests, while others continually make decisions based on moral principles? Why would a "good" person remain silent or indifferent about prevailing unethical activities or resist moral action in confronting ethical misconducts? How do we achieve integrity amid strongly competing forces? Various situations at the workplace call for moral courage, but issues of ethics and choice are complex and often involve taking a stand that many are reluctant to take. Hannah, Avolio, and Walumbwa (2011) define moral courage in the workplace as:

> (1) [A] malleable character strength, that (2) provides the requisite conation needed to commit to personal moral principles, (3) under conditions where the actor is aware of the objective danger involved in supporting those principles, (4) that enables the willing endurance of that danger, (5) in order to act ethically or resist pressure to act unethically as required to maintain those principles. (p. 560)

Moral courage is considered to be the pinnacle of ethical behavior (Murray, 2010, p. 2). In her classic book entitled *Education*, Ellen White (1952) powerfully describes the notion of moral courage as leaders and followers who

> will not be bought or sold; their inmost souls are true and honest; do not fear to call sin by its right name; conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole; will stand for the right though the heavens fall. (p. 57)

Prior studies on ethical leadership and followership have paid little attention to moral courage as a precursor to moral actions in the workplace. Many people may agree on what ethical action should be taken, but fewer people will follow through with the right thing (Collins, 2012). Weber and Gillespie (1998) tested this point by surveying the moral beliefs, intentions, and behaviors regarding cheating at work or in the classroom of 370 managers enrolled in an MBA program. Approximately 84 percent of the respondents replied that people who cheat should be reported; however, only 64 percent of the respondents stated that they would report a cheater. Also, only 40 percent of the respondents who observed someone cheating at work or in school did report the unethical behavior.

As correctly noted by Hendry (2004), "it is not the lack of moral reasoning that causes so much unethical behavior but rather a lack of moral courage" (as cited in Gini, 2006). Hence, this study was designed to explore the extent to which leaders and followers can translate their moral judgment into real moral action in the workplace. Specifically, I examined typical ethical situations encountered by organizational members at the workplace, asking such questions as: How do

organizational members respond to such encounters? What specific factors impede employees' moral action? To what extent are employees able to display attributes that typify moral courage at the workplace?

Theoretical Foundations of Moral Courage

Physical Courage Versus Moral Courage

The concept of courage is generally associated with acts of daring deeds that involve danger and risks in the face of opposition (Amos & Klimoski, 2014). A more detailed definition of courage as described by Rate, Clarke, Lindsay, and Stenberg (2007), is "a willful intentional act, executed after mindful deliberation involving objective substantial risk to the actor, primarily motivated to bring about a noble good or worthy end despite perhaps the presence of the emotion of fear" (p. 95). As this definition suggests, there is a calculated willingness and action in upholding ethical values.

Courage also means accepting responsibility, being able to go against the odds, breaking the status quo, and initiating change (Sen, Kabak & Yanginlar, 2013, p. 94). There are two types of courage: physical and moral. Physical courage involves the willingness to suffer physical harm or respond to physical danger. By contrast, moral courage is attributed to those who take ethical stances in spite of potential risks. Classic examples of moral courage include Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and others. Moral courage entails dealing with issues that are not necessarily physically threatening; instead, it is acting resolutely on moral convictions (Weiss, 2009, p. 284). Moral courage "is the fortitude to convert moral intentions into actions despite pressures from either inside or outside of the organization to do otherwise" (May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003, p. 255).

Kidder (2006) defines moral courage as the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical challenges firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating. Hence, he describes moral courage as "the courage to be moral," noting that "moral" is the adherence to the values of honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion. Moral courage normally includes three elements: dangers, principles, and daring (Baratz & Reingold, 2013, p. 90; Kidder, 2006). Mackenzie (1962) corroborates this point by noting that "one of the hardest tests of a man's moral courage is his ability to face the disapproval even of his friends for an action which strikes at all the traditions of his class but which nevertheless he feels compelled to take in order to be at ease with his conscience" (as cited in Kidder, 2006).

Moral courage also involves "the capacity to overcome the fear of shame and humiliation in order to admit one's mistakes, to confess a wrong, to reject evil conformity, to denounce injustice and also to defy immoral or imprudent orders" (Miller, 2000, p. 254).

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Moral Courage Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical models explain moral courage. According to Rielle Miller (2005), moral courage has five components: presence and recognition of a moral situation, moral choice, behaviors, individuality, and fear. Recognizing that there is a moral situation is the first step toward moral courage. When a moral situation is recognized, it immediately calls the observer to appeal to his/her moral intuitions, values, principles, etc. This leads to the moral choice component whereby the individual faced with a moral situation must resolve what to do. Once the individual makes a decision, s/he must have the courage to act on that decision. Therefore, what makes someone morally courageous is that his/her behavior is consistent with his/her beliefs and choice. Moral courage is not a group affair; it is a personal commitment to stand for what is right despite the potential threat. The final component as suggested by Miller is fear; undergoing fear implies that the individual has understood the situation at stake and the possible consequences.

James Rest (1994) also developed a four-component model showing that an individual is likely to behave morally if s/he (1) is aware that an ethical dilemma has arisen, (2) forms a moral judgment, (3) develops motivation to do something about it, and (4) is a person of high moral character. Similar to Miller's components, all four factors are essential. The first step in the process requires an individual understanding that a particular situation poses an ethical dilemma. However, the person must go beyond mere awareness of an ethical dilemma to form a moral judgment, be motivated to do something about it, and dare to take the appropriate action.

Lawrence Kohlberg's (1969) stages of moral development equally offer useful guides on how we form moral judgments in response to a series of ethical dilemmas (as cited in Weiss, 2009). According to Kohlberg, people sequentially progress through a continuum of six stages of moral development as they age and mature, beginning with egocentric punishment avoidance and culminating at the level of universal ethical principles. These six stages are further classified into three levels. As explained by Kohlberg, people begin their moral development at the pre-conventional level where moral reasoning is based on what benefits the individual. At this level, only self-interest is important; moral action depends on the consequences for the individual. At the conventional level, people are the interest of other social groups. Hence, moral action is based on pleasing others and maintaining societal order. At the post-conventional stage, moral actions are determined by established principles. Thus, an individual at this stage reasons and uses conscience and moral rules to guide actions instead of relying on group norms. It is only at the post-conventional level that an individual will exercise moral courage.

It is interesting to note that confidence is an important personal characteristic tied to acting with courage. May, Luth, and Schwoerer (2009) contend that moral efficacy is an individual's confidence in his/her ability to deal with ethical issues that may arise in the workplace. If an individual lacks a positive self-image, that person is unlikely to act with courage (Amos & Klimosk, 2014).

Hannah and Avolio (2010) also proposed moral ownership, moral efficacy, and moral courage as interdependent components that promote moral potency. Moral ownership is the extent to which organizational members identify and feel a sense of psychological responsibility, while moral efficacy is the confidence to act morally.

In sum, the above theoretical accounts suggest that moral courage depends on a multitude of factors. Therefore, to be morally courageous, a person has to be confident and committed to certain personal principles and values in spite of potential risks.

Methods

Study Design

In this study, my goal was to determine the extent to which employees and leaders alike are willing to uphold their moral principles. Hence, I adopted a mixed method descriptive design (survey and focused group interview) to gain a better understanding of participants' perspectives on ethical encounter experiences and moral courage.

Sample and Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed to 150 graduate students from a faith-based university in Kenya. These students represent a cross-section of workers from different countries in sub-Saharan Africa; they serve in different capacities as institutional leaders and followers, with a wide range of work experiences and leadership roles (e.g., CEO, CFO, teachers, supervisors, etc.). I deliberately chose this university because it is exclusively a postgraduate institution that mainly attracts the working class from different countries in Africa. Useable questionnaires were returned by 80 students (53% response rate), possibly due to the voluntary and sensitive nature of the questionnaire.

In addition, 42 participants from the same institution were scheduled in groups of seven for focus group interviews; these were designed to allow participants to share their thoughts and feelings about ethical encounters and actions in the workplace. During the interview I asked participants to describe at least one encounter they have personally experienced or observed in their work within the past two years that challenged their moral values and conscience, requiring moral action. Participants were encouraged to discuss the situation, how they

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felt about it, and how they dealt with that issue. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed to explore key themes. The average age and years of employment service of the participants were 35 (SD = 9.3) and 8 (SD = 6.5), respectively.

Measures

Moral Identity

I measured moral identity using five items (caring, fairness, dependable, honesty, compassionate) adapted from Barriga, Morrison, Liau, and Gibbs' (2001) "good-self assessment scale" to measure the extent to which ethical values are important to the participants' self-worth. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which certain moral traits were an important part of their lives using a five-point Likert-type scale anchored from 1 = "not important to me," to 5 = "very important to me," with a Cronbach's alpha of .79.

Moral Confidence

I measured moral efficacy using five items (α = .82) based on the Moral Conation Questionnaire developed by Hannah and Avolio (2010). These sample items included: "I am able to confront others who behave unethically in my workplace;" "I have confidence in my ability to readily see the moral/ethical implications in the challenges I face;" "I am able to work with others to settle moral/ethical disputes;" "I am able to take decisive action when addressing a moral/ethical decision;" and "I have confidence in my ability to determine what needs to be done when I face moral/ethical dilemmas." Participants were asked to indicate their level of confidence in their ability to carry out ethical responsibilities in the workplace on a five-point Likert-type e scale anchored from 1 = "not confident at all," to 5 = "very confident," with a Cronbach's alpha of .70.

Moral Courage

Moral courage was measured using seven items (α = .85) based on the Moral Conation Questionnaire developed by Hannah and Avolio (2010). Participants were asked to think about their typical actions pertaining to their workplace in regard to their willingness to speak out and do what is right in relation to: their peers, their supervisors, group decisions, their willingness to express unpopular opinions, their willingness to tell the truth at all cost, and their ability to withstand intense pressure. Sample items included: "Do you confront your peers if they commit an unethical act?" "Do you confront your supervisor if he/she commits an unethical act?" "Do you go against the group's decision whenever it violates your ethical standards?" Participants were asked to think about their typical actions at the workplace in relation to ethics and rate on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

Results

Table 1 shows the results of such encounters ranked in order of prevalence. Among others, the majority of the participants indicated "inconsistency" as the foremost ethical issue. Participants recounted various incidents of employees being treated discriminatorily because of where they come from or with whom they associate within the organization ("who you know syndrome"). When fairness becomes an issue in the workplace, organizational members find it easier to rationalize their bad behavior, which impedes accountability.

Table 1

Ethical Situations Encountered by Employees/Leaders

Ethical encounters	Rank
Inconsistent/unfair treatment (due to the "who you know syndrome") • Nepotism (hiring, sponsorship, promotion are given to relations and favorites) • Ethnicity and tribalism	1
Inconsistent application of organizational working policies and procedures • Subjective application of institutional policies • Delayed disciplinary actions • Giving excuses for the mistakes of others	2
Organizational politics • Procedural justice • Defamation/slander • Gossip	3
Financial fraud • Expense report padding • Misappropriation of funds • Manipulation of the financial report to the board • Procurement anomalies	4
Abuse of power/authority • Pressure to bend rules • Sexual harassment • Unauthorized travels	5
Lying (to cover mistakes or to protect someone)	6
Immoral relationships (extramarital affairs)	7
Attitude toward work/institution/employees • Using office hours for personal things • Using junior staff for personal errands • Tardiness • Absenteeism • Stealing office supplies • Using the organization's properties for personal use • Blaming other employees for poor performance • Insulting other employees	8
Lack of transparency/poor communication	9
Others • Conflict of interest • Broken promises (not trustworthy) • Misuse of budget	10

Table 2 presents the means and corresponding standard deviations of the quantitative data. The results suggest that employees perceive themselves as having high moral identity (M = 4.43, SD = .56), and therefore moral attributes such as caring, fairness, honesty, and compassion are essential to their sense of identity. On the other hand, a relatively lower score on moral efficacy (M=3.97, SD = .67) implies that employees do not have the requisite confidence to defend the principles that are essential to their sense of identity. Consequently, such employees are not able to muster the courage to stand up for what they believe is right; resulting in a low score in moral courage (M = 2.87; SD = .64). This confirms the discrepancy between who we think we are and what we actually do when confronted with ethical challenges. Sometimes we know the right course to take; yet when faced with a specific situation, there is a strong temptation to do what is wrong or engage in inaction. In the words of Gini (2006, p. 120), people feel reluctant to do the right thing because they find it hard "to stand outside their shadow." Badaracco (1997) describes this type of experience as a "defining moment," where we discover whether we live up to our personal ideals or only pay mere lip service.

Table 2
Extent of Employees' Moral Potency

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Moral Identity	4.43	.56
Moral Efficacy	3.97	.67
Moral Courage	2.87	.64

Figure 1 also affirms the above results and shows respondents' reactions to ethical situations. More than 70% of the respondents reported that they would rather keep silent or do nothing when confronted with ethical issues. According to Callahan (2004, p. 62), "when you put people under pressure and give them a choice of preserving either their integrity or their financial security, many will go for the money." Comer and Vega (2011), however, contend that how we behave depends on the consequences we may personally face, as well as the impact on others. Accordingly, we are more likely to abandon our moral principles when there are relatively high organizational pressures to act against our moral standards if doing otherwise will cause greater personal loss, or when violating our moral standards will have a minimal negative impact on others. No wonder many people would rather dishonor their moral principles if their job, close relations, or ability to support their dependents were threatened.

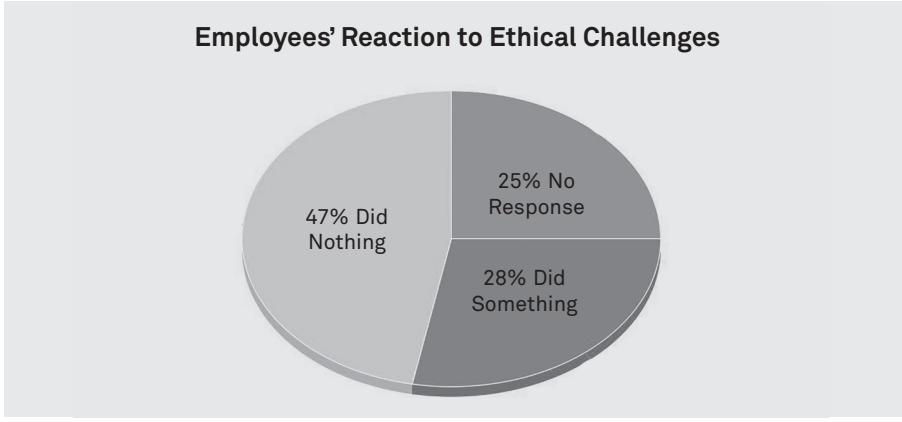

Figure 1. Employees' reaction to ethical challenges

Table 3 shows evidence that employees and leaders have their own reasons for keeping quiet in spite of having concerns. The results suggest that the fear of consequences (victimization, intimidation, threats, etc.) is the main reason why workers are not able to defend their moral convictions. Keeping cordial relationships is also a significant point in determining our willingness to act. More so, employees would normally resort to inaction if they doubt any positive outcome or change.

Table 3
Factors That Impede Employees' Moral Action

Reasons for inaction	*Rank*
Fear (of victimization, threats, intimidation)	1
Protect relationships	2
Protect job or position or the future	3
Nothing will be done–Speaking up is a waste of time	4
Nothing will be done–Speaking up is a waste of time = Majority rules	5
Do not have a "voice" or the power to change things	6
It is someone else's job to correct such, not me–It is not my job	7
No established systems to deal with such situations	8
Unethical organizational culture	9
African culture–"don't oppose the 'elder'"	10

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Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that many of us are not able to carry through on our ethical judgment and actions due to fear and relationships. Unfair treatment, subjective application of working policy, dishonesty in financial matters, etc., are common ethical issues in the workplace. Choosing to remain silent and protecting relationships highlights the importance of our sense of belongingness. In Africa for instance, maintaining relationships is especially important to our identity; this may be due to our collectivistic orientation. African proverbs such as, "Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament," or, "Cross the river in a crowd, and the crocodile won't eat you," capture the essence of collectivism.

Moreover, some believe that justice is ultimately God's; therefore, there's no need to voice earthly injustices. Such believers find no compelling reason to speak against questionable practices. Additionally, the hierarchy of power among employees at different levels may affect their ability to stand up for their core values. Again, many people in African societies exhibit a more significant degree of power distance, whereby people do as they are expected and look up to authority for directions (Hofstede, 1991; Smit, 2007). In South Africa for instance, subordinates do not easily approach or contradict their superiors (Smit, 2007).

Limitations

As with all research, this study has limitations that offer further opportunities for future research. One limitation of this study is the fact that it included a relatively small sample of the graduate student population. Future research could expand the sample size to determine if the outcome of the study would be different. More so, the use of focus group interviews in this study could limit the free expression of participants' thoughts and opinions due to the presence of others. Some participants may be hesitant to fully express their views in such a setting, or feel group pressure to give similar examples of ethical situations.

Practical Implications: Nurturing Moral Courage

No doubt doing the right thing is both a personal and organizational responsibility. Sometimes, people resolve to inaction because of the lack of organizational support for doing the right thing. Bird (1996) describes such condition as moral muteness, which subsequently leads to moral deafness and blindness. Institutional constraints such as hierarchy, loyalty, and submission to authority make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action. This means that organizations need to create ethical environments that promote and support moral courage. More so, building the capacity for action with courage is a

leadership requirement (Sekerka, McCarthy, & Bagozzi, 2011). Leaders at all levels must consistently and proactively model exemplary behavior that exemplifies selflessness, commitment, and moral courage. There must be institutionalized, collaborative discussion across ranks about the ethical issues employees face and how to resolve such issues together.

On the other hand, moral courage is a personal affair and choice–to act morally in spite of the fear factor. Therefore, the individual has a responsibility and a role to play. Having a close personal relationship with God or a spiritual connection with a higher being may serve as a useful foundation for moral courage. Employees who have a deep sense of calling would potentially act more courageously because they have a deeper internalization of the mission than those who do not feel a calling (MacDonald, 2011). Such people may go the extra mile to make a difference as far as defending their values are concerned. A person who feels "called" has a sense that God has an interest in his/her job or career, and will therefore take principled risks knowing that God will provide, and will likely feel that their integrity is worthy of personal cost (MacDonald, 2011). Thus, morally courageous employees often draw on the strength of their faith to face the ethical challenges of daily organizational life.

Conclusion

This study examined typical ethical situations encountered by organizational members in the workplace and the factors that impede employees' moral action. The results affirm that organizational pressures can compromise our moral behavior, and we may be more vulnerable to pressures than we would like to think (Comer & Vega, 2011). To exercise moral courage, we need to examine who we are and what is important to us.

If moral courage is indeed the missing link between moral principles and action, then we need to find ways to express and encourage it in the workplace. Indeed, "the world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil but because of those who look on and do nothing" (adage attributed to Albert Einstein).

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