Balanced Experiential Inquiry - Group Activity

<mark>**Step 1 - Identify an ethical issue:**</mark>

Think back to a time when you experienced, faced, or observed an ethical issue of discrimination in your organization. The situation may have involved you or another person experiencing exclusion, unfair treatment, a lack of respect, bullying, or the use of words and/or actions that seemed to harass or intimidate a person or group. For example, perhaps you observed a situation where someone in the workplace engaged in anti-Muslim or Islamophobic behavior. Regardless of whether the discrimination was implicit or explicit, the situation may have presented a conflict between your personal values and those being demonstrated in the circumstance. Perhaps the situation was a conflict between others, based upon differences in personal beliefs, traditions, or cultural values. Perhaps the values of other employees or the organization itself ran counter to your own beliefs, traditions, or cultural values. Regardless of who was being discriminated against, it was likely difficult for you to act, to know what to do, or to determine how to resolve the issue. As you think back on your organizational experiences, this is a time when you may have been unsure how to act or did not initially know what to do. The situation was probably undesirable, based upon the risks involved in your taking action. The experience seemed to present an ethical or moral issue and, at the time, none of your options seemed particularly favorable.

<mark>**Reflect on your scenario and to consider the following:**</mark>

a) What was the ethical issue and what did you do?

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b) What were you thinking and feeling at the time?

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c) What role did your cultural or religious background play in your perceptions, interpretation, and response?

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d) What supported (or curtailed) your ability to respond to the ethical issue with moral courage?

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Step 2 - Share your story with a partner then examine your shared strengths and barriers:

    a) What supports (or curtails) *a person's* ability to respond to an ethical challenge with moral courage?

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    b) What about *the organization* supports (or curtails) an ability to respond to an ethical challenge with moral courage?

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Step 3 - Report-outs and Group Discussion (prompts)

➢ Share examples and describe thoughts, feelings, and responses.
➢ What role do emotions play in the ability to engage in moral action?
➢ What supports or curtails the ability to proceed with morally courageous action in the workplace?
➢ What actions can you and your organization take to foster respect for others; especially for those with religious values or perspectives considered to be different from your own or what's perceived to be the norm?
➢ Does the organization value a moral strength-based approach, as a performance goal?

NOTES:

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Supplemental Reading

**Building Moral Courage
Through Balanced Experiential Inquiry**

By

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Abstract

Purpose – *Describes an experiential-based method of conducting ethics training with the aim of strengthening employees' demonstration of moral courage in the workplace.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Provides a model for ethics training using an innovative approach called "balanced experiential inquiry," designed to meet the needs of adult learners while providing an opportunity for employees to strengthen the use of their moral muscles.*

Findings – *The process creates an opportunity for employees to learn from prior ethical challenges they have faced in the workplace. Using experiential learning and facilitated group dialogue, participants strengthen their moral competency and prepare for effective response-action when facing future ethical dilemmas.*

Practical implications – *This novel model for approaching ethics training uses a process that meets the needs of adult learners and goes beyond compliance requirements to build moral strength.*

Social implications – *Enables employees to examine their prior ethical behaviors and strengthen their moral muscles, preparing them to demonstrate future ethical actions at work.*

Originality/value – *Advances the view that ethics is not a characteristic that an employee does or does not have, but rather it is more like a muscle, which can be exercised, toned and strengthened.*

Building Moral Courage
Through Balanced Experiential Inquiry

Reframing Ethics Training

Sustaining ethical behavior at work is essential for creating high-performing organizations. Given the propensity for ethical scandals in business, the effectiveness of current organizational ethics training programs has been called into question. It is time to reconsider how we approach ethics training, moving to inculcate ongoing education that supports and encourages individual and collective development.

First, from a process perspective, the predominant model for ethic training closely mirrors the coursework model used in formal, higher-educational settings. This model is highly content-focused (i.e., learning specific ethical frameworks, theories, and policies) and instructor-driven (i.e., the instructor or website shares content for employees to memorize or master). Educators have recognized that this model is not the most effective for employees. From experiential learning theory, we know that for adults to truly learn something, they need to go through a learning cycle. This process includes having a concrete experience, reflecting on that experience, conceptualizing abstractly about the experience, and actively experimenting with new behaviors (Kolb, 1984). Applying the principles of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1973; Merriam, 2001) to the design, we need to also acknowledge and leverage the fact that our participants:

- have an independent self-concept and can direct their own learning,
- have accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning,
- have learning needs closely related to their changing social roles,
- are problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and
- are motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.

From a content perspective, most ethics training programs focus on increasing employees' knowledge of their own level of ethical awareness or philosophy (e.g., rule-based), as well as teaching implications for new mandates (i.e. sexual harassment laws) and policy compliance. While such knowledge is important, it does little to cultivate effective moral decision-making and behavior in the workplace. It is not enough to know the rules, or what the options for action are, if a person is not willing to act on this awareness. It often takes moral strength for an individual to do what they know they should, in facing an ethical issue.

Professional moral courage (PMC) has been shown to be a critical link between *awareness* of what is right and actually *doing* what is right (Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009). PMC has been described as an underlying decision to engage in moral action given the ethical standards of one's profession, and then displaying the moral strength to pursue this path – despite the potential for adverse consequences, including negative emotions, risk, difficulty, or threat to self. The concept of PMC invites us to re-conceptualize our approach as trainers of business ethics toward viewing morality as a muscle that can be exercised, trained, and toned – rather than a quality or trait a person does or does not have. From this approach, we can begin to create better training programs that provide managers an opportunity to "work out" their moral muscles that

support moral action. Research has shown that individuals who demonstrate PMC use four core skills when faced with an ethical challenge (Sekerka, McCarthy, Bagozzi, 2011). We refer to these skills as moral competencies, which include:

- *Emotional Signaling:* Ethical issues often elicit a range of emotions felt or anticipated, from interest and curiosity, to confusion and fear. Such emotions contain important signals that influence moral decision-making. Individuals who exercise emotional signalling use these emotions as cues to help them make a moral decision.

- *Reflective Pause:* Exercising reflective pause involves using a purposive self-imposed time-out for insight and deliberation, regardless of time constraints. Those who respond to challenges with PMC use this pause as a strategy to slow things down, clear the mind, collect one's thoughts, generate options, and get external input before making a decision.

- *Self-regulation:* To act in an ethical manner, people need to manage personal desires and emotions that may run counter to various external demands within the organization. This includes an ability to know whether to postpone a response or respond immediately. Thus, people need to regulate their initial reactions, as they work to sustain the willingness to proceed with moral action, even when others may not provide affirmation or support.

- *Moral Preparation:* Moral preparation serves as a rehearsal process for moral decision-making, readying the self for future intentional moral responses. Individuals who demonstrate PMC use this muscle to internally reaffirm their desire to respond ethically when faced with a future ethical dilemma.

Each of these muscles is important to strengthen and develop if we want employees to act in an ethical manner. Just as one would not expect a novice athlete to complete a marathon without proper training, one cannot expect managers to engage in moral action and demonstrate PMC without opportunities to build moral competency. This means creating specific training opportunities for managers to exercise these muscles. A useful tool in this regard is balanced experiential inquiry (BEI), which is a process specifically designed to address adult learning needs and provide employees with the opportunity to develop moral strength (Sekerka, 2016).

Using BEI to Strengthen Professional Moral Courage

The BEI process has been applied in a variety of organizations, ranging from government employees and military service personnel to academic settings with students in undergraduate and executive education programs. It is a dedicated workshop session where individuals exercise their moral competencies on real ethical challenges from workplace experiences.

Table 1: BEI Process as Related to Moral Competencies and Adult Learning Principles

BEI Step	Moral Competency Exercised	Adult Learning Principle Considered	Phase in the Experiential Learning Cycle
1. Identify an ethical scenario	Moral Preparation; Reflective Pause	Building on personal life experience; Allowing for self-directed learning	Concrete experience
2. Examine strengths and barriers	Emotional Signaling; Reflective Pause; Self-regulation	Allowing for a problem solving focus; Allowing for a strength-based focus	Reflection and abstract conceptualization about experience
3. Report-outs and group discussion	Emotional Signaling; Reflective pause; Self-regulation; Moral Preparation	Allowing for immediate application of knowledge	Conceptualization about experiences and beginning to experiment with new behaviors

The workshop aims to provide a holistic learning experience that brings "balance" to a variety of tensions employees face when dealing with ethical issues at work, including past positive and negative experiences with moral dilemmas. At its core, the workshop seeks to balance two core change management techniques: diagnostic (deficit-based) and appreciative inquiry (strength-based). BEI invites the sharing of stories, honoring both positive and negative aspects of their ethical issues, and to think about factors that support and impede their ability to proceed with ethical action.

Although a trainer facilitates the process, BEI is not trainer-centered; rather, it focuses on identifying and using salient examples of participants' ethical dilemmas as the learning content. It is not a pre-packaged or lecture-based activity; each BEI session is tailored to the unique experiences of the participants. There are specific steps in the process; however, instructors remain flexible, using situations relevant to the actual participants. When employees engage in BEI, they are guided to better understand PMC and to practice the four moral muscles that help facilitate it. Inquiry, reflection, and dialogue are used to help employees discover how they might engage in PMC and to see how their efforts shape the ethical culture of their organization. Table 1 summarizes the steps for conducting a BEI session, as well as which moral competency each step exercises and the adult learning principles considered.

Step 1: Identify an ethical scenario: At the outset of a BEI session, employees are asked to individually write down a brief description of an ethical challenge that they have faced in the workplace and what they were thinking and feeling at the time (similar to the critical incident interview technique: Flanagan, 1982). Participants are guided to consider situations that may

have been difficult (hard to act), problematic (uncertain), or set forth a dilemma (no one correct answer). The following general instructions are read aloud:

> *Think back to a time when you faced an ethical challenge while at work. An example might be a situation where there is a conflict between doing what you think you should do and what the organization, boss, or peer norms suggest. This might involve a conflict between your own values and the organization's goals. The situation may have made it difficult for you to act, to know what to do, or to determine how to resolve the issue. As you think back about your experiences that you have encountered while on the job, this is a time when you may have been unsure how to act or did not know what to do. The situation was likely undesirable, based upon the risks you perceived. The experience presented a moral issue and, at the time, none of the options seemed particularly favorable.*

The group is then given time to individually reflect, consider ideas, and take notes about personal experiences with ethical challenges at work. Group members are asked to address the following questions during this period:

- What was the ethical issue and what did you do?
- What were you thinking and feeling at the time?

This step is used to help develop moral preparation. Every session begins with the solicitation of ethical challenges participants have encountered, prompting self-directed learning based upon life experience, a core tenant of adult learning theory. Employees are asked to consider their past feelings, decisions, and actions (or inaction). In so doing they begin to discern their own moral agency. Situations often present conflicting or competing values, and employees generally seek verification to establish what they should have done. For example: What are the so-called "right" actions in this case? While the facilitator works to validate and affirm their experiences, they remain non-judgmental about what is (or is not) an ethical challenge or what is (or is not) a "right" decision or response. The scenarios vary, but often include stories that involve rule-bending; stealing, lying, and/or cheating; sexual harassment or inappropriate activity; drug/alcohol problems; bribery/corruption; and bullying and/or various forms of discrimination (e.g., name calling, wrongful termination, etc.). Regardless of whether the scenario offered resulted in a moral action (or otherwise), every case presents a learning opportunity to better understand and rehearse moral strength. Central to the competency of moral preparation, Step 1 invites participants to consider, examine, and begin to look honestly at their willingness to engage in moral action.

Step 2: Examining strengths and barriers with a partner. Participants are then asked to form pairs to share their story with a partner. This starts an ethics dialogue and encourages conversational learning among employees. As the group members work in their dyads, the facilitator visits each pair to see how they are doing and to determine some of the key issues for this organization. Supportive probes are provided to pairs less comfortable with this initial engagement, affirming their effort and helping them to launch their dialogue.

After the exchange of scenarios and experiences, the pair is asked to determine what supported (or curtailed) their ability to proceed with moral action in the reported circumstance. Participants are reminded that this may be an internal or external characteristic of their process or the situation itself. This step is designed to emphasize an action orientation, considering specifically

what promotes or blocks moral action. Additional time is provided to address the following questions in the dyads:

- What supported (or curtailed) your ability to respond with moral action?
- What about the organization or management supported (or curtailed) your ability to address this situation effectively?

This step helps participants exercise their moral competencies of reflective pause, emotional signalling, and self-regulation. Additionally, it takes into consideration the adult learning principle of focusing on real-life issues with a problem-solving approach.

Step 3: Report-outs and group discussion. This final step continues to elevate the experiential focus and conversational learning nature of the activity, bringing people together through collective story-telling about personal issues. The facilitator asks for volunteers to present situations in community (to the larger group). In describing their stories, participants connect to others, establishing shared value around the desire to "do the right thing." Most people have never discussed their ethical issues with others and, if they have, rarely with a group of organizational members. While everyone has an instinct to avoid public scrutiny, the desire to remain silent is often superseded in BEI by the opportunity to discover and learn.

Many people share because they seek affirmation for their actions, want ideas for solutions, or consider their situation as a learning resource for the group. Rarely do participants present a scenario where they see themselves as moral exemplars. Rather, most people choose situations that they view as being an unfinished episode (i.e., some aspect of the event or their response is still unresolved) or that surprised them. The choice to impose a self-directed time-out and consider their story before sharing it publically exercises the moral muscle of reflective pause. Self-regulation also gets a workout as participants manage their feelings and desires, allowing themselves to become vulnerable to public scrutiny for the sake of learning and development.

Participants empathize with their colleagues as they report their dilemmas, ask one another questions, and determine key knowledge from their shared challenges. Often they collectively presuppose what they might do differently in the future, or even how they might change organizational policies and practices to better support ethical performance. Barriers to moral action emerge over the course of the session, typically revealing how narrow self-focused concern is a deterrent for PMC. People sometimes move to blame some person, place, or thing that is cast as being out of their control (i.e., nothing they can say or do will make it right). This is used as a learning point to affirm the need for personal responsibility and moral preparation as a part of one's identity.

As participants work together to deconstruct the situation and identify what promotes or curtails their willingness to engage in moral action, the facilitator tracks and diagrams this information on a whiteboard or flip chart at the front of the room. Here the facilitator notes the specific situations deemed problematic, what emotions were experienced, what happened, and where moral muscles were exercised (or could have been) in the specific encounter. Depending on the length of time allotted for the workshop (typically between two to three hours), several scenarios are examined with additional probes set forth during the exchange, such as:

- How will you overcome these challenges?
- How will you sustain your own ethical strength, as a model to others?

In addition to helping participants exercise moral muscles, this step also honors the adult learning principles to enable immediate application of knowledge to work-related issues they will undoubtedly face during their tenure on the job.

Lessons for Facilitating Learning in a Self-Directed Environment

Although the process of BEI is self-directed and rooted in the content raised by participants, it is important to recognize that the facilitation is not passive. Rather, a BEI facilitator has an important and active role to play in the session while adhering to the principles of adult learning outlined above. For example, in some workshops members know one another; in others they do not. Therefore, to create a safe space the facilitator establishes an open dialogue, promoting ongoing reflective questions back to the group to let them review and deconstruct the scenario, potentially reframing but without imposing judgment. The process is not designed to determine what the "right" action should be, but how one learns to manage the emotions, thoughts, motives, evaluations, and intentions in the decision to engage (or not engage) in moral action. In some cases, a decision to take no action may be an appropriate moral response.

The facilitator consistently guides the discussion by elevating the positive aspects of the stories. Combined with affirmations, this helps establish trust for openness as participants engage in reflection and dialogue. The facilitator becomes a pseudo-role model for practicing the BEI process by demonstrating how to share insights, pose concerns, and challenge employee peers to examine situations in varying ways. In so doing, participants develop a shared sense of ownership for the issues presented and conduct an ethics dialogue in an open forum-type setting.

The facilitator should "check in" with each participant, ensuring that they have discussion time, if so desired. Without pressure to share, each person can be encouraged to participate in some fashion. Equity is established by having everyone engage in some way. If some remain aloof, quiet, or removed, the facilitator should try to include them by simply asking their opinion on a matter or inviting their involvement in procedural duties without inducing pressure.

Throughout the process, the facilitator prompts the group to examine both the strengths and weaknesses of each case, at the individual, group, and organizational levels. The facilitator continually points out what moral competencies were demonstrated in the situational story being shared, how and when they are used in the session, and how ethical challenges serve as a platform to strengthen them in the future. As employees openly describe their issues to others, they begin to experience a sense of vulnerability. The process can be anxiety-provoking as people become open to criticism in front of others and the tensions originally present in the circumstance are recalled. Participants are likely to experience emotions, as they exercise their moral muscles. Both positive and negative sentiments may emerge, which mirror the experience of facing an ethical challenge. Managing thoughts and feelings is at the core of moral competency, via self-regulation. Occasionally, employees may be reluctant to offer up their stories and remain quiet for much of the session. Others are more emboldened, expressing enthusiasm to share their encounters as if they finally have an opportunity to get help. Most are curious and want feedback. As the conversation unfolds, however, increased stress can emerge,

as decisions and actions are discussed. This may emerge as nervousness or even anger. Again, such negative emotions are similar to what is experienced at the onset of facing an ethical challenge.

It is the role of the facilitator to continually remind participants that they are practicing what it feels like to engage in PMC, assuring them that this is an appropriate, managed, and safe process. It is essential that the facilitator supports the group in this effort, affirming that BEI is an activity that invites emotional signalling and self-regulation in a group context, key for ongoing moral preparation. It is important that respect is ensured and explicitly provided. The idea of a safe space is to help encourage discourse around subject areas that are difficult to discuss, and to practice going beyond compliance. In rare occasions where an unlawful act has been identified, it is necessary to direct this information in a lawful manner (after the session).

After conducting several workshops, facilitators build a repertoire of stories. Anonymous vignettes from other sessions can be used to: a) highlight any missing points (e.g., ensuring emphasis on self-regulation), b) alleviate tension in the room by generating humor from external examples, and c) emphasize how workshops take-aways can be used for ongoing personal and organizational improvements. The notion of personal responsibility is underscored throughout the process and employees leave with an experience that affirms how moral muscles need exercise to be strengthened.

Impact of BEI

Unlike traditional ethics training programs that use generic or third-party cases for discussion, BEI uses personal stories directly from employee participants. While it starts with individual reflection on past experiences, the process also prompts collective dialogue, which helps create an atmosphere for conversational learning via group discussion. This environment allows for both individual reflection and collective meaning-making, important elements in the learning cycle. Finally, BEI invites participants to seek balance between their individual conscience (*what I think is right*) and collective peer pressure from the group reaction and dialogue.

Empirical research found that managers participating in BEI show an increase interest toward engaging in ethical decision-making and a decrease in negative emotions as they considered engaging in future moral action. They also required a lower need for praise when deciding to engage in a moral action (Sekerka, Godwin, & Charnigo, 2014). These findings coupled with feedback from participants illustrate that the use of a BEI activity addresses the needs of adult learners while also working to build moral strength, thus helping to increase the potential capacity for moral courage in workplace settings.

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