Role Morality
by Professor Robert Prentice

Sometimes organizational and psychological pressures cause even good people to act unethically. In a lawsuit over a car wreck, an insurance company representing the defendant demanded the right to have its doctor examine the plaintiff. When he did, the doctor found that the plaintiff had a life-threatening brain aneurysm. Because it would have disadvantaged the insurance company's defense, the doctor did not tell the plaintiff, who did not find out for two more years. Why would a doctor keep this vital information from an injured man? Obviously, the doctor viewed his job as protecting the insurance company's financial interests, Hippocratic Oath be damned. This is an example of something ethicists call role morality.

Role morality has been defined as feeling that you have permission to harm others in ways that would be wrong if it weren't for the role that you are playing. Role morality often involves people acting in ways that they would view as clearly unethical if they were acting on their own behalf, but because they are acting on behalf of their employer or a client, they view their actions as permissible.

In a detailed study of a corporation, sociologist Robert Jackall found that many employees segregated their personal beliefs from the ethics of their workplace. He quoted an officer as saying: "What is right in the corporation is not what is right in a man's home or in his church. What is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you. That's what morality is in the corporation."

When people check their personal moral code at the door, they can suddenly become capable of doing horrendous things. After World War II, Albert Speer, Hitler's Minister of Armaments and War Production, said that he viewed his role as an "administrator." As a mere administrator, he convinced himself that matters relating to human beings, including, of course, the Holocaust, were not his concern. This man checked his humanity at the door.

A study by professors at Brigham Young University found that family businesses are more likely to act in a socially responsible way than bigger companies. The family name is on the door and officers want to act in ways that reflect well upon their family. However, people working in bigger corporations find it easier to separate their personal feelings of how business should be done from their role inside the organization. We cannot leave behind our personal beliefs as to right and wrong when we walk through our office doors.
Questions for classroom discussions: Role Morality

1) Do you agree that a person should have one set of morals for family and church and another set for his or her employer?

2) Have you ever done anything that made you feel uncomfortable to please an authority figure or to help your company that you would not have done to help yourself? Have you been tempted to?

3) Have you ever broken some rules to help out a friend in ways that you would never have done to help yourself? Have you been tempted to?

4) Have you ever seen someone act unethically and justify his or her actions by saying “I’m just doing my job?” What did you say or do in response? What should you have said or done?

5) Has an employer ever explicitly asked you to set aside your own ethical standards?

6) How can you guard against being the victim of role morality?