Moral Imagination
Questions for classroom discussions

1) Can you think of a time when you or someone whom you know used moral imagination? If so, what motivated you (or this individual) to use moral imagination?

2) What kind of organizational context would encourage the use of moral imagination?

3) What can leaders do to encourage the people who work for them to use moral imagination?

4) The video suggests that it often takes courage to exercise moral imagination. What kind of things would give people the courage to use moral imagination?

5) The video suggests that moral imagination may require one to buck the status quo. What can one do to learn how to move beyond the status quo and do things differently?

6) What does moral imagination have in common with other types of creativity and innovation?
Additional Teaching Note

The three videos in the Moral Trilogy—Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness, and Moral Imagination—are intended to be used together. Moral myopia and moral muteness often reinforce each other, and breaking free of moral myopia and moral muteness can enable one to develop moral imagination. These concepts and many of the rationalizations that underpin them are described and documented in a Journal of Advertising article by Minette E. Drumwright and Patrick E. Murphy, “How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness and Moral Imagination” (2004, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 7-24).

One way to teach the Moral Trilogy is to stop the videos at certain points and ask some of the discussion questions related to the specific situations referenced. For example, two different students talk about situations involving sharing answers for schoolwork. The instructor could stop the video at one of these points and ask questions such as, “Does this go on at our university? What kinds of rationalizations are used? Is there moral myopia or moral muteness about this topic? How would one overcome them?”

In teaching the videos on moral myopia and moral muteness, instructors can often tie in with current events about scandals that likely involved moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of people. One example involves the recent allegations of academic fraud at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) and the criminal indictment of Professor Julius Nyang’oro, long-time chairman of the African American Studies Department at UNC. Nyang’oro was indicted for teaching dozens of barely existent or questionably led classes, including one lecture class that never met in which 18 out of 19 students were members of the UNC football team. He also presided over a department in which more than 500 grades were illicitly changed often with professors’ signatures forged. If the allegations are true, a scandal such as this could not have occurred absent moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of people. As another example, Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong for years adamantly denied that he had taken performance-enhancing drugs, and then in 2013, he confessed on the Oprah Winfrey show that he had indeed taken drugs. Armstrong and those who supported him in the cover up most likely suffered from forms of moral myopia and moral muteness. Likewise, Penn State coach Jerry Sandusky’s sexual harassment of young boys and the related cover up likely involved moral myopia and/or moral muteness.
on the part of a number of parties, including highly respected coaches and university officials.

Examples of moral myopia and moral muteness that involve illegal behavior are often some of the most dramatic. However, it is important to emphasize that moral myopia and moral muteness do not always lead to criminal behavior, and they are not limited to situations that involve breaking the law. For example, one could imagine that the recent disastrous roll out of the Obamacare website involved moral myopia and moral muteness on the part of a number of individuals.

The videos on moral myopia and moral muteness tie in nicely and reinforce the concepts and ideas in the Ethics Unwrapped film, In It to Win, about the infamous lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who was convicted of a number of crimes and served time in a federal prison. In the film, Abramoff asserted that he did not realize that he was involved in highly illegal and unethical lobbying activities as he was committing the crimes, indicating a severe form of moral myopia. He also said that he did not talk about these activities with people who might have provided him with ethical counsel, indicating that he had moral muteness.

The rationalizations that support moral myopia and moral muteness illustrate the perceptual biases of behavioral ethics, which are illustrated by a number of Ethics Unwrapped videos, such as those on the conformity bias, obedience to authority, the self-serving bias, and tangible and abstract. Many of these biases are described in a forthcoming article by Robert Prentice, “Teaching Behavioral Ethics” in the Journal of Legal Studies Education (2014). The Moral Trilogy videos can be used in conjunction with the behavioral ethics videos and Prentice’s article.

Moral imagination is illustrated in two forms in the video: 1) finding a way to be both ethical and successful (e.g., the advertising agency CEO who resigned a big client rather than do something unethical that the client was insisting that he do and found a way to cut costs, pitch new business, and keep everyone employed) and 2) finding a way to make money and serve society (e.g., TOMS Shoes’ one-for-one donation; for each pair of TOMS shoes that is purchased, the company donates a pair to someone in need). It can be helpful to make a distinction between these two forms of moral imagination; the former involves integrity, while the latter involves corporate social responsibility.
Drumwright and Murphy (2004) found that advertising practitioners who used moral imagination worked in advertising agencies that encouraged moral sensitivity. In these agencies, organizational values related to ethics had been articulated and broadly embraced. Advertising practitioners in these agencies often talked about ethical issues with their co-workers and their clients, and they viewed providing ethics counsel to their clients as part of their roles as trusted business advisors.

The ideas related to mitigating moral myopia and moral muteness and encouraging moral imagination are very much in sync with the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) approach created by Mary C. Gentile. See the Ethics Unwrapped video series on Giving Voice to Values and Gentile’s website of GVV cases and readings. Four GVV cases were written by Drumwright and some of her students to help undergraduates recognize moral myopia and moral muteness and the rationalizations that can support them and to help them understand how to give voice to their values and exercise moral imagination (See “Part-time Job with a Full-time Challenge”, “Market Research Deception”, “Student Privileges with Strings Attached”, and “Online Identities (A) & (B).” Cases such as these can be used in conjunction with the Moral Trilogy videos.

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/teachingresearch/gvv/Pages/curriculum.aspx
Additional Resources

**Academic Articles:**


**Cases:**

See the Giving Voice To Values (GVV) Curriculum for cases that provide evidence of Moral Myopia and Moral Muteness. All GVV curriculum materials are free to instructors and students here:

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/Teaching-Research/Gvv/Pages/Home.Aspx

Especially see the GVV cases written by Minette E. Drumwright and her students, “Part-Time Job With A Full-Time Challenge,” “Market Research Deception,” “Student Privileges With Strings Attached,” and “Online Identities (A) & (B).”

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/Teaching-Research/Gvv/Pages/Curriculum.Aspx
News Stories On Scandals:


http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/16/sampling-of-lance-armstro_0_n_2489461.html

Transcript of Narration
Written by Associate Professor Minette Drumwright

It can be difficult to have integrity in the workplace at times, especially when it seems that many people are succeeding through unethical behavior. It can be tempting to throw up your hands and say, “I’ve got to be unethical if I want to succeed!” or “If I’m ethical, I’ll go broke!” This type of thinking creates a false dichotomy between being ethical and failing OR being unethical and succeeding.

Some people are able to break out of this type of thinking, even in very tough circumstances. They have what scholars such as Mark Johnson and Patricia Werhane have referred to as “moral imagination.” Moral imagination is the ability to think outside the box and envision ways to be both ethical and successful—alternatives that many people cannot even imagine.

I encountered a vivid example of moral imagination in my research with Patrick Murphy that was published in Journal of Advertising. The CEO of a major advertising agency described a time in which his largest client, who accounted for more than a third of his agency’s revenues, asked him to do something he considered unethical. He objected, but the client dug in his heels and insisted that the advertising agency carry out the unethical behavior. As they parted, the client said that they would revisit the issue at a meeting the next day, and he also...
commented that he was confident that the CEO would change his mind and comply with his request, especially if he wanted their relationship to continue.

The CEO went back to the office and discussed the client’s request at length with his team. After a good deal of deliberation, they came to the conclusion that they could not comply with the request. At the meeting the next day, the CEO used his most persuasive arguments in objecting to the behavior, but the client stood firm. The CEO resigned the account just before the client fired him. Suddenly, one-third of the agency’s revenue disappeared. Typically, in a situation like this in advertising, most if not all of the people working on the account get pink slips; they are fired to reduce the agency’s fixed costs dramatically and immediately. The CEO said that he did not believe that this was the right thing to do. He gathered his team together, and they brainstormed ways to cut costs and pitch new business. And then they did those things. In the end, no one was fired, and the agency made it through the crisis successfully with its credibility and its reputation intact.

In my research in this ad agency, many people recounted this same story to me. It had become a legend that embodied and communicated the values of the organization. Moral imagination not only helps people deal with ethical issues that they face in the workplace but also it helps businesses act more ethically in society.

So what can we do to develop moral imagination? First, reject the false dichotomy that we have to either, be ethical and go broke or to be unethical and successful. Second, accept the fact that ethical problem solving is a part of our role as professionals and apply the same problem solving skills and approaches to ethical issues as we do to other issues. Recognize that if we want to be trusted business partners, we must deal effectively with ethical issues. Third, talk with other people who share our perspective about the importance of finding ethical approaches and brainstorm alternatives. And finally, have courage! We can have the best values in the world, but they don’t do anyone any good if we don’t have the courage to put them into action.