

Moral Imagination

This video introduces the behavioral ethics concept known as moral imagination. Moral imagination is our ability to think outside the box and envision ways to be both ethical and successful. Moral imagination is illustrated in two forms in the video: (1) find a way to be both ethical and successful (for example, 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) find a way to make money and serve society (for example, TOMS Shoes' one-for-one donation; for each pair of TOMS shoes sold, the company donates a pair to someone in need). Making a distinction between these two forms of moral imagination can be helpful; the former involves integrity, while the latter involves corporate social responsibility.

Advertising practitioners who use moral imagination tend to work in advertising agencies that encourage moral sensitivity. In these agencies, organizational values related to ethics are clearly articulated and broadly embraced. Advertising practitioners in these agencies often talk about ethical issues with their co-workers and their clients, and they view providing ethics counsel to their clients as part of their roles as trusted business advisors.

This video is a part of the three-video Moral Trilogy package. The three videos in the Moral Trilogy—[Moral Myopia](#), [Moral Muteness](#), and [Moral Imagination](#) (this video)—are intended to be used together. Moral myopia and moral muteness often reinforce each other, while breaking free of moral myopia and moral muteness can enable one to develop moral imagination.

To learn more about other ways moral imagination can be enacted or encouraged, watch *Ethical Leadership, Part 2: Best Practices* and *Being Your Best Self, Part 3: Moral Intent*.

The case study on this page, “In-FUR-mercials: Advertising & Adoption,” shows how an advertising agency used its moral imagination to increase pet adoptions at the Lied Animal Shelter when the shelter faced a spike in animal intake. For a case study that illustrates how companies can benefit from moral imagination, read “The Costco Model.”

The three behavioral ethics concepts in the Moral Trilogy and many of the rationalizations that underpin them are described and documented in an article published in the *Journal of Advertising* by Minette Drumwright and Patrick Murphy, “How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Myopia, Moral Muteness and Moral Imagination” (2004, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 7-24).



Behavioral ethics draws upon behavioral psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things. Many behavioral ethics concepts are explored in detail in [Concepts Unwrapped](#), as well as in the video case study [In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story](#). Anyone who watches all (or even a good part) of these videos will have a solid introduction to behavioral ethics.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: corporate social responsibility, integrity, moral imagination, moral muteness, and moral myopia.

Discussion Questions

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 Resources

Academic Articles:

Bird, Frederick B., and James A. Waters. 1989. "The Moral Muteness Of Managers." *California Management Review* 32 (1): 73-88.

Drumwright, Minette E., and Patrick E. Murphy. 2004. "How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia, and Moral Imagination." *Journal of Advertising* 33 (2): 7-24.

Gentile, Mary C. 2010. "Keeping Your Colleagues Honest: How to Challenge Unethical Behavior at Work—And Prevail." *Harvard Business Review* 88 (3): 114-117.

Gentile, Mary C. 2010. *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Prentice, Robert. 2004. "Teaching Ethics, Heuristics And Biases." *Journal Of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

Werhane, Patricia H. 1999. *Moral Imagination And Management Decision-Making*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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:

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).”

News Stories On Scandals:

Barrett, Paul M. 2014. “[The Scandal Bowl: Tar Heels Football, Academic Fraud, and Implicit Racism.](#)” *Businessweek*, January 2.

Belson, Ken. 2012. “[Sandusky’s Trial Begins With Graphic Testimony.](#)” *New York Times*, June 11.

Boren, Cindy. 2013. “[A Brief History of Lance Armstrong Denying Doping Allegations.](#)” *Washington Post*, January 14.

Associated Press. 2013. “[Lance Armstrong Doping Denials Over the Years.](#)” *Huffington Post*, January 16.

For resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: “[Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.](#)”

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: “[Teaching Behavioral Ethics.](#)”

An article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: “[Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?](#)”

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. “Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases.” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by

***Minette Drumwright, Ph.D., MBA
Department of Advertising and Public Relations
Moody College of Communication
The University of Texas at Austin***

“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."