

The Ethics of Organizational Change (3)

Part 3: How to remain ethical in the midst of everyday living constraints and temptations ?

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This paper is the last of a set of three papers on the ethical issues one may face when leading or promoting change in an organization. More generally, these papers shed light on ethical issues in social change.

They are based on personal reflections and on interviews of 31 practitioners (consultants or executives). Chapter 2 of the first paper presents the research methodology and gives information about these interviews. I have also included additional views from a few audience members to whom I had the opportunity of presenting an earlier version of this work.

In this short final paper, I investigate ways people use to remain ethical, in their own view, in the midst of everyday living constraints and temptations.

Most of my interviewees described their relationship to ethics as something they feel.

“We know when we are doing good; the feeling comes before the reasoning.”

“It is something I feel.”

In other words, they report having some sort of inner ethical compass. However, there is always the possibility of disregarding it or losing one’s connection with it.

1. Why ethics can be left aside

Ethics is not always an easy path to follow. There are at least two reasons for this.

Firstly, one might sometimes easily see the ethical way to do something, but there may be strong temptations to ignore it because of the discomfort or disadvantages this might entail.

Secondly, there are also situations where the distinction is unclear between what is ethical and what is not. This is particularly true when the key to this distinction lies in the intent rather than in the action. We have seen in the previous papers that these cases are not rare. Then, temptations to do what might be more comfortable or advantageous, regardless of ethics, may blur our awareness of our true intent.

Where do these temptations come from, then? In my conversations, two source categories kept coming up.

One is due to business constraints. When one has to make a living, find or keep a job, as an executive or as a consultant, the fear of losing one's job (or not getting it in the first place) can be a strong source of temptation to ignore ethics. This pressure is even greater when one is in charge of a company, i.e. having to make enough money to pay others. Sometimes, the business constraint is a short-term one: paying bills and salaries at the end of the month. Sometimes it might be a longer-term one: getting a particular job and being successful in it can make one more employable in the future, or winning a contract with a client can enhance the company's image, hence ensuring a better business in the future.

«What makes me lose the feeling of being in line with my ethics? Personal gain at stake, possibly.»

«Sometimes I go too fast when taking on a job. Perhaps just to get it.»

«We have a reputation of integrity. When necessary, we say we can't do things. That's the joy of being small.»

«As an independent, I can always decide when I leave, but the challenge is when you need the money.»

«The real test is: do I give up income to do the right thing?»

The other source category is some form of ego satisfaction. Being the successful one, the one who knows, the one who made it, is a powerful and attractive way to cope with one's fear of being rejected, not loved, of not being a valued person. Power over others easily makes us forget about the constant care we need to maintain power over ourselves, to accept our own limits as human beings.

All these strong drives and fears provide us with equally strong temptations simply to ignore ethics, or somehow to justify non-ethical behaviour.

«As consultants, we are given power, we have an aura; we can abuse it for personal ends. Our ego gets inflated.»

«Power corrupts; as soon as I had some, I wanted to use it. I felt I knew, I was tough (against my principles).»

« People are persuaded by a person because of their passion, but this is not without danger. Once you have this power, you need to be careful.»

Of course, those two sources can often be combined. Developing one's business and becoming successful on a pragmatic level are not just about surviving and feeding one's family. Often, they are also about being a "great" person, hence providing adequate ego satisfaction and developing greater confidence.

2. Ways of keeping aligned with one's ethical compass

The persons I talked to were concerned about ethics, but also faced temptations. I was interested in how they dealt with this.

From our conversations, I identified two main (and complementary) ways.

2.1. Ethical reviews

If you wish to succeed in anything, you need to pay attention to it. This is true in many respects and it applies, in particular, to the ability to remain ethical throughout life's events.

However, events can be sufficiently stressful that we sometimes forget about our desired attention to ethics and this is where reviews can be important. Several of my interviewees reported that they reviewed their behaviour after a day or after an event when such issues were present. One of them talked about her *“evening moral assessment.”*¹.

However, just doing these reviews is not always sufficient. Some of my interviewees reported that they introduced a «virtual» person in the review, imagining that they have to tell that person what they did and seeing whether they are comfortable with it, or passing the *«local newspaper's front-page test»*, i.e. considering whether they would be OK to read the report of what they did in the headlines of their local newspaper.

Several of my interviewees went further and said they introduced real persons into the process. They reported that talking to a trusted person, sharing with them one's doubts and possible weaknesses, was a very precious resource. As one of them said, even coaches and therapists have a supervisor, so why would consultants or change agents not have theirs, particularly when they face difficult issues?

«Each time I find myself at the edge, I have good friends that I talk to to test my moral compass.»

«I always think of using a colleague as an informal supervisor and vice versa; we talk when we feel we have an ethical issue.»

2.2. Enhancing self-awareness and wisdom

Paying respect to one's own ethical law takes more than reviewing. More precisely, reviewing is a consequence of both a willingness and an ability to do it. As many of my interviewees told me, this calls for at least two qualities. One is self-awareness;

¹ I am aware that some philosophers (but not all) make a distinction between «moral» and «ethical», «moral» being rather linked with social norms, while «ethical» would be more personal. I have avoided to use the word «moral» in these papers, but many of my interviewees, as I suppose many people, would use the one or the other word indifferently.

as we have seen in the previous papers, ethics is often about the true intent behind what we do. Some self-awareness is therefore indispensable in order to identify what we are really seeking through a given action or attitude.

The other quality is what I would call “wisdom”, although my interviewees would not necessarily call it that. They would likely prefer to describe their journey towards greater control of their ego, an improved ability to serve something beyond themselves. However, aren't we talking about the same thing? Obeying one's own ethical law means accepting one's limit as a human being, accepting to be ruled by something beyond our personal practical or egotistical interests. This, at least, is a significant step towards wisdom.

«My responsibility is to help people reflect. The ethical mistake lies in projecting one's own ideas. Of course, when the client asks for my approval, it satisfies my ego. The key is to remain self-conscious.»

«My advantage is the clarity of distance: I must keep aware of myself and not be sucked in by my own emotions, in order to act right and use this clarity of distance.»

«Before, my ego was greatly satisfied whenever I succeeded; now, I am more humble about what constitutes success and about my role in it - my teams do it. The search for ego satisfaction can easily lead to manipulation.»

« I am more tolerant, more human, no longer working just for my personal success.»

Self-awareness, as well as wisdom and control of ego, are never-ending processes. They hardly ever reach perfect outcomes but one can always make progress. This is about working on oneself. Nowadays, there are many ways to do this and this variety was evident among my interviewees, although most of them said they are or had been doing some work on themselves.

Moreover, there seems to be a double phenomenon at play here. Not only enhanced self-awareness and wisdom enable one to respect one's own ethical law, but they may also help shape situations in change processes in which some ethical issues just disappear. In other words, integrity and exemplarity are a powerful source of influence, hence allowing one to avoid the “manipulate-or-fail” dilemma. By integrity, I mean the true service of a greater good, without consideration for self-interest; by exemplarity, I mean being true to the underlying values that legitimize a given change, which may often entail that the change agent too undertakes some personal change journey.

«When I do it because it is right, it comes easily. But one needs to struggle a lot before being able not to struggle...»

«When the vibrations are right, the others feel it too and they resonate with it. I cannot have right vibrations alone, the feeling comes from what others transmit to you. It's a system.»

«You need integrity. The audience is a mirror.»

«If you want to be a good leader, you have to love people. If you do not do it for them, it is going to be more difficult.»

«If the leader does not change, his staff feel it and don't get involved.»

«If the leader doesn't want to change, change can still be efficient, but only short-term.»

If a change doesn't work (or only works unethically), it is because the leader does not change.»

This has some resonance with the attitude I have described in paper 1 in Lao-Tseu's Tao-Tö-King (the wise man does not act or enforce anything, but harmony takes place around him), or with Gandhi's famous quote: *"Be the change you want to see in the world"*.

Concluding remarks

The philosophy of ethics has several branches. One of them deals with what is ethically right. We met this when talking about pragmatists and idealists (see papers 1 and 2), or, in more technical terms, consequentialists and deontologists. This means that we explored the various views of what can be regarded as ethically right or wrong by people when facing the ethical issues organizational or social change may entail.

Another branch deals with ways and means of becoming a "good" person. This branch was initiated in the Western world by Greek philosophers, from amongst whom Aristotle was one of the most famous in this respect.

Although these two major branches do not address the same questions and were not mainly built by the same thinkers, one can see in the conversations I had during this research how they are linked. It is of little use to know what would be right to do if one is not willing to listen to the advice or if one lacks the courage to follow it.

More widely, this exploration of ethics in organizational change comes to an end through this paper. I started it in the wider context of reflection and exploration of what makes an action in the world truly meaningful for someone. My intuition was that some of this meaning could be revealed by the relationship with ethics. Another intuition and hypothesis was that part of the meaning could be due to the fact that a given action or project will help a person grow in autonomy and maturity.

What I have found is that organizational change, and most probably social change in general, requires an intense reflection on ethics; it is not just about respecting a set of simple rules. This leads to profound questions, such as: "Who am I as a change

agent? What is my role with other people? What am I serving?" Of course, one can lead change or participate in it without much consideration for ethics and one can discuss at length whether or not this may ultimately pay. In any case, if change agents maintain a healthy concern for ethics, this will encourage them to face up to important questions and difficulties. It will urge them to make progress in terms of self-awareness, the need for clarification and acknowledgment of their inner law, acceptance of the service of something beyond them. This might not be their formal goal when embarking on this role, but it is one of the benefits they will pick up on their journey.

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