Ethics and leadership: enablers and stumbling blocks

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- *Many of the scandals, indiscretions and collapses, over the last few years, at formerly venerated organizations were the results of toxic relationships, dubious economic models, opaque workplace paradigms, as well as questionable collective and individual actions and behaviours of people who, ordinarily, would not be considered 'typically criminal'. The individuals involved have typically been people with good education, caring parents, were community contributors and, by all accounts, appeared to be upstanding members of society. Their involvement, therefore, in corrupt acts and relationships thus brings a numbers of issues under question — an important one of which is their ethical maturity, and the forming of that ethical development through important societal institutions such as: religion, education and the family. We set out to understand what some of the stumbling blocks were that prevent individuals from courageously acting on their sometimes vast bases of theoretical/common knowledge with respect to ethics and morals, but which has not yet become common practice. Additionally, we also sought to understand what the various enablers were for individuals who were able to live and act ethically, to further enhance such ethical and moral living and working. Our research sample was 646 middle managers who were all enrolled on the MBA programs of the University of Cape Town (South Africa) and Erasmus University (Netherlands). The research respondents self-reported on both the stumbling blocks and enablers, through writing up their personal experiences for our research. They also reported on what some of the practical actions were that they employed to live and work ethically. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Introduction

Ethics is about what is just (system of morals), discerning what is right or wrong in order to achieve distributive justice (discernment and choice), and is about defining the practices and rules, written and unwritten, which inform responsible conduct and behaviour between individuals and groups in order to maintain, or enhance, the common good (rules of conduct and behaviour). C.S. Lewis (1952: 74) wrote: 'We might think that provided you did the right thing it did not matter how or why you did it; whether you did it willingly or unwillingly,

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sulkily or cheerfully, through fear of public opinion or for its own sake. But the truth is that the right actions done for the wrong reason do not help to build the internal quality or character called a 'virtue' and it is this quality or character that really matters'. Everything we do has a consequence—this is a plain and simple matter of ethics, such that ethics is fundamental to the very essence of who we are as individuals and people, and sits deeply within the values, and sense of values, of people. Kidder (1995: 66) also argues that '...in that domain there is no law, which inexorably determines our course of actions and yet we feel we are not free to choose as we would... It grades from a consciousness of duty nearly as strong as positive law, to a feeling that the matter is all but a question of personal choice... It is the domain of obedience to the unenforceable. That obedience is the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself'.

Organization of the paper

Within the ethics literature, a number of categories exist. In the first category, which is the most broadly diffused, is the category of popular leadership-based literature which can often also draw on religion. In the second category, one finds a body of literature concerning business ethics. Both of the bodies of literature, draw, to a greater or lesser degree, on the philosophical and psychological bodies of literature. This third category of virtue ethics on the one hand and situational social psychology on the other, is key to an overall understanding of the enablers and stumbling blocks around ethics. In this paper, we set out to briefly touch upon the first two, more popular categories of ethics literature. Further attention will then be given to 'one of the most venerable and most heated debates in philosophy' (Doris and Stich, 2006), that between the proponents of virtue ethics, based on Aristotle, and the situationists who maintain that classical virtue ethics cannot be actioned

and people do not exhibit consistency or *globalism*.

Literature review

Popular ethics literature

Mahatma Gandhi (quoted in Covey, 2002: 323) stated that a person cannot do right in one area while attempting to do wrong in another area. Life, therefore, is one indivisible whole. People in leadership have to be ethical and circumspect, as they are in a position to alter the course of other people's lives because of their mere influence or power (Simpkins, 2005: 206). Cashman (2004: 20) promotes the idea of 'awakening ethics', which take the form of placing the 'who' behind the 'what' and uses Nelson Mandela as an example of this. 'Rather than separate their deepest values and principles from their work, the most powerful leaders lead as whole people. When the entire ''who'' is behind our actions, our voice and behaviour are charged with authentic energy. Align your principles, emotions and purpose behind your actions'.

> *Through 27 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela befriended his captors, reminding them what was important. In the embodiment of his principles, he transformed those around him. He shined the light of what was important and illuminated the essence of ethical leadership.*

The reason to briefly quote some of this popular literature is twofold: it is extensive, and it is influential, for example, Peck (1978).

Business ethics literature

The business ethics and business ethics education literature is also extensive. As with the popular literature, it tends to provide a vast array of commentary while not necessarily grounded in the fundamental ethics literature.

Moral leaders prefer not to compromise, accommodate or collaborate in areas where core values are at stake (Korac-Kakabadse

et al., 2002: 172). According to Orme and Ashton (2003: 186) ethics are fundamental to who we are, and are buried deep within our value system. 'They grow and evolve with us, and changing our ethics involves changing at the very heart of our being'. Behavioural scientists tell us that these values are formed early in life. Our values and ethical foundations are often influenced by those who have helped to shape our view of the world—parents, teachers, coaches, family, friends, colleagues and mentors. Fransworth and Kleiner (2003) believe that education serves to reinforce existing values and encourage their application. They cite both early education experiences and family influences as having the most critical impact on the integrity of future business leaders and their willingness and ability to be value-driven. Copeland (2004: 26) is in agreement with this, but believes that the influence of others in shaping our morals, values and propensity to be ethical plays a limited role—'it is a role of influence, rather than control. Like it or not, ethics and integrity—or the lack of them—finally boil down to individual people and the decisions they make. We can't look to other people or processes to make us do the right thing'.

For Harrison (2001: 3), there are essentially two schools of thought about why business should or ought to be ethical. The first school is that being ethical is good for the bottom line. The second school argues that business should be ethical because being ethical is the right thing to do. Balshaw (2003: 57) believes ethics are important as 'clearly families want businesses that build value, have a long-term orientation, are sustainable, focusing on the triple bottom line (profit, people, planet), and trustworthy'. This refers to what Fisher (2003: 96) describes as 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to business ethics. It 'is not an alternative account of what is right or wrong (normative ethics) rather, the distinction provides an insight into understanding the connection between business leaders' motivation for making a commitment to ethical behaviour and the behaviour of individuals within organizations'.

Maxwell (2004: 19) therefore defines an ethical dilemma as 'an undesirable or unpleasant choice relating to a moral principle or practice'. Pfeiffer and Forsberg's (2005: 2) definition is in line with the transcendental ethics approach as they view 'ethics as the study of justification of ethical value judgements. An ethical value judgement is a judgement of right or wrong, good or bad, better or worse virtue or vice, or what ought to be or ought not to be done. Judgement involves giving reasons or evidence for the truth or falsehood of a given judgement'. Shipka (1997: 103) subtly states that 'much of what you consider right or ethical is a result of your culture, community and family' although Code (2006: 226) claims that 'ethics is not supposed to be ambiguous, it is to offer clear directives, a normative system that can guide thought and action, rules for the direction of conduct and for the building of moral character'. Lamsa (1999: 347) disagrees with Shipka by arguing that 'people seem to be motivated to behave according to custom in order to avoid the negative consequences associated with unconventional behaviour in moral conflicts'. Koestenbaum (2002: 125) goes on to explain that to 'be ethical is to be motivated in a unique way and not by pleasure, fear, inclination, habit, approval, social pressure or what is prudent; the source of your action is instead the rational fact that it is right'.

De George (1999) defines ethics as 'a systematic attempt to make sense of our individual and social moral experience in such a way as to determine the rules that ought to govern human conduct, the values worth pursuing and the character traits deserving development in life'. Mahoney (1998: 189) defines ethics as shaping not only what we do but also who we are. He goes on to argue that ethics is essentially an active concept not only the acceptance of morals but also the moral courage to 'do the right thing'. This conforms to Senge's (1990: 159) 'commitment to the truth', not necessarily in seeking out absolute truths but in having 'a relentless willingness to root out the ways we limit or deceive ourselves from seeing what is'. Hackman and Johnson

(2000) view ethical behaviour as a product of four intrapersonal communication processes: moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation and moral action. The processes involve recognizing that our behaviour impacts others, identifying possible courses of action, determining the consequences of each possible strategy (moral sensitivity) then deciding, which course of action to follow (moral judgement). The desire to do the right thing (moral motivation) generally comes into conflict with other values like security, wealth and social acceptance. Ethical behaviour only results if moral values take precedence over other considerations. The culmination of moral sensitivity, judgement and motivation is moral action (Hackman and Johnson, 2000). Johnson and Johnson (2003: 378) describe ethics as 'the morally principled, acceptable and refined behaviour while interacting with others'. Connock and Johns (1995) reiterate this definition of ethics by describing the process as 'being about fairness and deciding what is right or wrong, about defining the practices and rules, which underpin responsible conduct between individuals and groups'.

Mahzarin *et al*. (2003: 64) are of the opinion that 'only those who understand their own potential for unethical behaviour can become the ethical decision-makers that they aspire to be'. Copeland (2004: 26) shares a similar view and believes that we do not have a right to live in an ethical society until we have personally done everything we can to create a microcosm of that ethical society in our own lives, and the lives of those around us. Korver (2008: 15) states that leaders can avoid ethical mistakes by understanding and championing five principles:

(1) *show you know the difference between legal and ethical*. *Legal* is something you find in a book of rules or laws, while *ethics* is something you find within yourself. Ethical standards are uttered by your inner voice;
(2) *show you reject rationalization, even on the small things*;
(3) *show you will not construe a matter of temptation as a matter of ethics*. Leaders should call a temptation a *temptation,* and not a dilemma. Ethical leadership depends on getting this one right;
(4) *show you distinguish between action- and consequence-based ethics*. In *action-based ethics*, we judge an act based on whether the act, in isolation, is ethical. In *consequence-based*, we judge an act based on the results of the act; and
(5) *show you can use ethics to transform the workplace*. Consistent acts of ethical high-mindedness give courage and power to workers to know, and to do, the right thing.

Virtue ethics as enablers

Kover's five principles clearly point towards Aristotle and by extension, to the debate between situationists and proponents of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics or character ethics directs our attention not just to questions about what is the ethical thing to do, or how we are to act ethically, but what does it mean to be an ethical sort of person (Mahoney, 1998). The four cardinal (*cardes*, hinges) virtues of Chase (1911) and Greek philosophy—*justice*, *wisdom* (prudence), *courage* (fortitude) and *moderation* (self-control, temperance) form the basis of Western ethics. The intellectual virtue of wisdom is education-based, while the moral virtues of justice, courage and moderation are practice-based. All other virtues are derived from those above.

Mahoney (1998: 191) emphasizes that ultimately what virtue theory brings out more than any other ethical theory applied to business, public and social activities is that there is really no substitute for integrity, including the trustworthiness, loyalty and moral courage of the individual person working within the company, and for its best interests. It was Plato who noted that the way to virtue was through knowledge of the Good. According to him, if we knew without a doubt that virtue was always for our good, that justice is always more profitable than injustice (the central teaching of *The Republic*), then we would have no motive for preferring vice.

Lantos (1999: 222) explains that 'the ethical person chooses the moral course of action regardless of personal sacrifice'. April *et al.* (2000) believes authenticity and ethics are linked when they argue that 'in order to become an authentic leader, it is important to know where one stands on important moral and professional issues and then act accordingly'. Persons of character do not allow situations to be the determining force behind their actions (Scarnati, 1997: 25) since 'what we have worked hard to achieve during our lifetime can be quickly lost if the basic principle is seriously violated'.

Situational social psychology as stumbling blocks

Situational social psychologists argue that the notion of ethics is not global (Alzola, 2006) — it evolves according to time and culture (Svensson and Wood, 2003), and each individual, at a given place and at a given time, has a unique degree of ethics. It is situation-specific (Annas, 2006). The main proponents of the situationist thesis (Zimbardo, 1971, 2004, 2007; Doris, 1998, 2002; Harman, 1999, 2002, 2003) base their views on psychology experiments. Arjoon (2008) summarizes five types of situational contexts which can lead to ethical suboptimization. Obedience to authority originates from Milgram's (1974) Yale University electric shock experiments and from Zimbardo's (1971) Stanford Prison experiments. Mood effects, which can be characterized as organizational culture, derive from Isen and Levin (1972). Bystander studies (Asch, 1951; Latane and Darley, 1968, 1970; Latane and Rodin, 1969) point to conformity when ethical behaviour is called for. The Good Samaritan or hurry factor (Darley and Baston, 1973) shows how people do not stop when that would be the right thing to do. Lastly, the honesty and deception in school children studies (Hartshorne and May, 1928) show that children behave inconsistently.

Within the business ethics literature, situationist authors (Gandossy and Sonnenfeld,

2005) have shown how many of the recent corporate crises like Enron, Shell, Tyco, Worldcom can be traced back to a range of these factors, with organizational obedience to authority looming largest. Jones and Ryan (1997) use a moral approbation model of four factors which affect ethical behaviour. Important are the severity of consequences of an action, the certainty about whether it is moral or immoral, the perceived organizational pressure, and the degree of complicity. Trevino (1986) and Jones (1991) follow similar lines. An increase in awareness of ethical issues can lead to an increased perception of uncertainty and risk (Holian, 2006: 1134) as 'for most people, the black and white, right and wrong decisions are easily made. It is the shades of grey that make the right thing to do difficult to distinguish' (Copeland, 2004: 26). Cashman (2004: 20) argues that 'without an objective inventory of what we have, and do not have, as leaders we fall into two ethical pitfalls: (1) we do not know when we are challenged by an ethical dilemma, and (2) our trust and credibility are diminished with others because of our lack of self-awareness'.

Some caveats

Positioning situational social psychology as proponents of immoral behaviour is of course incorrect. What the situationists simply point to is that situations can create bad behaviour. The debate between virtue ethics proponents and situationists, as outlined above and long seen as a dichotomy, need not be seen as such (Webber, 2006). Anscombe (1958) and MacIntyre (1984, 1999), dissatisfied with how virtue ethics had been developed, suggested that to be human is to act reasonably and rationally in society. Their work has led to more integrative thinking about how character, virtue, motives and moral psychology affect behaviour in various situations. That said, the negative behaviours which can be created situationally provide a framework of classification for the stumbling blocks in the study. To overcome situationalism, rules and frameworks are

needed. Thus, rules have been included as one of the enablers of ethical behaviour, as have the four cardinal virtues derived from Aristotle.

Research methodology

We set out to understand what some of the stumbling blocks were that prevent individuals from courageously acting on their sometimes vast bases of theoretical/common knowledge with respect to ethics and morals, but which has not yet become common practice. Additionally, we also sought to understand what the various enablers were for individuals who were able to live and act ethically, to further enhance such ethical and moral living and working. In order to do so, we initially gathered 646 middle managers who were all enrolled on the MBA programs of the University of Cape Town (South Africa) and Erasmus University (Netherlands). We initially provided them with our definition of 'ethics':

Ethics is concerned with moral obligation, responsibility, social justice and the common good, and can both be taught and also exist instinctively in an individual. Ethics are a set of moral principles or rules of conduct (virtues) by which human beings live in relation to other human beings, nature, God and/or themselves, and against which human actions and proposals may be judged good or bad, or right or wrong, in a particular context. These rules of conduct, recognised in respect of a particular class of human actions, when acted upon through choice among equally plausible alternatives by an individual, shape his/her character (lived virtues/values/principles). In other words, ethics are not simply a series of norms or values to be imposed as a template upon people, but rather implies a rational, discursive practice on the part of the individual — and is most evident at a time of ethical dilemma. The main factors which most likely cause people to compromise ethical standards are: pressure to meet unrealistic business objectives/dead-lines, desire to further one's career, and the desire to protect one's livelihood.

We encouraged the research respondents to write their own personal stories and self-report their experiences relating to the stumbling blocks and enablers. We also asked them to report on what some of the practical actions were that they employed to live and work ethically.

Once we had received the written situated-experiences of the research respondents, we set out to begin analysing the qualitative data at hand, using a 5-step blueprint (Srnka and Koeszegi, 2007: 35): (Figure 1).

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2001) discuss two approaches for analysing qualitative data: content analysis and grounded theory. Whilst the former counts key words or phrases and then does an analysis of the frequencies, the latter searches for patterns or themes in the data and then does an analysis that could be used as a basis for interpretation. The latter is thus more useful when dealing with transcripts, and includes systematic analysis to highlight themes and patterns (Lacey and Luff, 2001) and inferences are then drawn from a larger population, with participants' own language and perspectives included in the data analysis. In the case of our research, we made use of both the grounded theory approach and basic content analysis. To assist in the coding effort, a computer-aided, qualitative, data analysis software tool called Atlas ti was used. Atlas ti software was designed specifically to support grounded theory analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Using the content analysis technique, frequencies (number of occurrences) of each category were tabulated.

After analysis of the 646 self-reported documents, there were 255 different mentions (in 10 separate themes) of the enablers that respondents felt would enhance their ethics, there were 98 different mentions (in six separate themes) of the stumbling blocks that needed to be overcome in relation to being more ethical, and the research respondents mentioned 176 different practical actions/recommendations (in 10 separate themes) which they took in their own lives in order
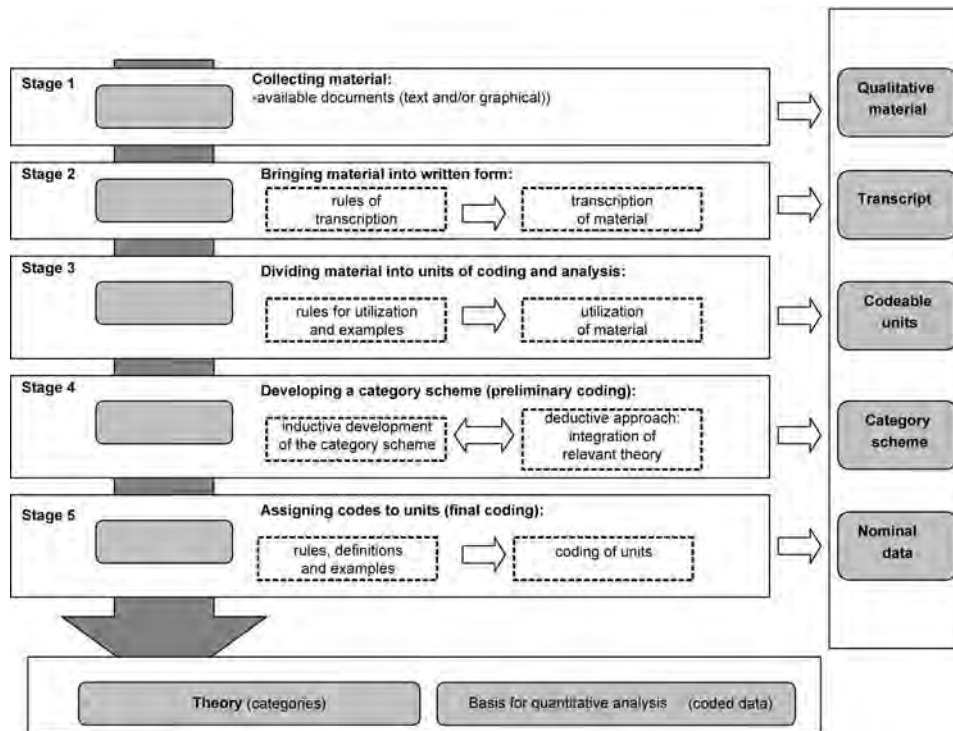
Figure 1. Blueprint providing guidelines for the qualitative analysis process (adapted from Srnka and Koeszegi, 2007).

to be more ethical (these mentions and categories are listed in Tables 1–3, respectively).

Research findings

In line with the literature search and the framework developed above, enablers were grouped according to their themes, as listed in Table 1 to provide maximum detail, and were then grouped as comments in line with the set of Aristotle's cardinal virtues together with the situational corrector: rules and regulations. Similarly, ethical stumbling blocks are described in detail in Table 2 and have then been bundled as comments in line with the situational typology developed previously.

Ethics enablers

Table 1 shows the frequency of the mentioned enablers (how many times an enabler was

mentioned, in ascending order) which were listed by our research respondents:

Intellectual and practical wisdom

Upbringing. Odom and Green (2003: 67) argue that 'early education experiences and family influences are going to have the most critical impacts on the integrity of future business leaders and their willingness and ability to be value driven'. P400 concurred and stated: '*Every building that lasts is built on solid foundations. Similarly when we build our "self"—our character or personality—we need a solid platform to build on. It is therefore vital that we have an ethical foundation, that we use to judge our actions or viewpoints*'. P122 also argued: '*I have the good fortune to have been guided by my mother, who even though she had not progressed beyond grade 8 at school, taught me to live a life based on consideration for*

Table 1. The number of quoted occurrences of ethics enablers

Themes of enablers mentioned	Listings
Upbringing	57
Spirituality	54
Mentors and role models	45
Honesty, courage and integrity	37
Self-control	21
Conscience	17
Standing up for own beliefs	8
Codes of conduct	8
Self-knowledge	7
Defining moments	1

Table 3. Number of practical actions/recommendations mentioned by respondents

Themes of practical action/ recommendations	Appearances
Act in accordance with my values and beliefs	29
Increase self-awareness	17
Develop, make use of and value my support network	14
Religion/spirituality	12
Act with courage	11
Practice reflection, meditation and mindfulness	11
Be open, honest and transparent	10
Embrace diversity	9
Heighten awareness and exposure	9
Other	54

others, to know the difference between right and wrong and to act in accordance with that knowledge, and if in doubt, to consult somebody who knows'. P391 also related to folklore and stated: '*My adult life therefore draws back and is shaped mostly by my fundamental beliefs, which were infused in me by my grandmother. In her pursuit to instil moral instincts in me, she would sometimes tell me mystical stories that would make me differentiate between good and bad, and mostly discourage me from what our society perceived as bad*'. P232 questioned the usefulness of a protected upbringing and stated: '*I am proud of where I come from and, by and large, I think that the morality that was instilled in me has helped to shape the person I am. However, as I have grown into an adult I have trouble at times assimilating these values with the realities of my adult life, which appear more complex*'.

Table 2. The number of quoted occurrences of ethics stumbling blocks

Themes of stumbling blocks mentioned	Listings
Bottom-line mentality	34
Organizational influences	31
Fear	21
Peer pressure	8
Compliance	2
Humour	2

Spirituality. P41 claimed: '*It is my belief that there is a higher force that we are all responsible and accountable to. I am talking about my belief in the Bible and what it teaches about the existence of God, that God is love and that God created the universe. I use the Bible to understand love, which is the call message that God tries to send to every mankind. In believing in the ethics and authentic values through following the Bible, I create a special bond with God*'. P119 concurred and stated: '*My sense of right and wrong has been greatly influenced by my religion. I am aware of God watching me and am aware of the profound influence the rigid code of conduct that my religion requires of me, and its effect on my everyday life*'. P254 contrasted the Christian and Islamic beliefs and argued: '*I am a practicing Muslim and my religion is a huge cornerstone of what I define as good or bad behaviour. The Quran does not have a set of commandments similar to that in the Bible. Instead, the Quran defines specific guidelines on what is acceptable and what is not. These guidelines form the principles on which I base my ethics and values*'. Shipka (1997) advises that it is through spirit that we infuse deeper meaning and purpose to our lives. Through our spirituality we also unleash untapped, unlimited creative potential, we

comprehend our connection to reach others and all life.

Mentors and role models. Odom and Green (2003: 67) argue that 'when leaders are truly transformational and serve as role models of ethical behaviour, a positive culture will permeate the whole organization'. P38 agreed and stated: '*I believe that mentors serve as beacons of light and morality, especially when faced with difficult decisions. I am fortunate enough to have had a number of mentors to date*'.

Honesty/courage and integrity. P332 viewed honesty as '*a non-negotiable policy but when faced with sensitive issues, I have had to temporarily compromise on my policy and hold back on my honesty*'. However, Lewis (1952) wrote: 'We might think that provided you did the right thing, it did not matter how or why you did it—whether you did it willingly or unwillingly, sulkily or cheerfully, through fear of public opinion or for its own sake. But the truth is that the right actions done for the wrong reason do not help to build the internal quality or character called a virtue and it is this quality or character that really matters'. P120 by contrast believed ethics required: '*...the courage to make an unpopular decision without concern for personal consequences*'. P266 believed: '*Honesty and integrity allow the clear projection of one's own intentions and thoughts*'.

Justice

Standing up for own beliefs. P38 wrote: '*Whenever I am placed in a difficult or grey situation with two or more choices where morality/ethics is questionable, I refer to this instant in my life and ask myself which of the two options is the more difficult. Experience has shown me that the more difficult choice is the ethical option, and because of past experiences having resulted in awful circumstances, I now always choose the high road, that is, I practice*

greater self control and avoid unethical temptations'.

Conscience. Scarnati (1997: 26) argues that 'dedication to the virtue of honesty establishes an internal warning system called ''conscience'' that will assist in keeping us upright and out of unethical situations'. People who listen to their conscience experience deep fulfilment, even in the midst of difficulties and challenges (Covey and Merrill, 1994: 185). P89 agreed and wrote: '*My conscience is one factor that enables me to keep grounded into the issues of ethics. This is not to suggest that it prohibits me from engaging in unethical acts, but often than not it prevents me from becoming too far involved and makes me to realize that my actions were being contrary to the norms of a decent person. My conscience causes me to realise that although there are no legal obligations involved, there are major issues about keeping one's word, about being honest and about being fair, that are values that need to be considered and applied if we are to live in a society that is both satisfying and at least relatively stable*'. Badaracco (2006: 34) argues that 'a moral compass is useful for questions of right and wrong but in most organizations, however, the hardest choices arise when right conflicts with right'. P139, however, believed: '*It is the conviction that you know that you will be able to sleep at night, that what you are doing will make the world a better, safer place that enables us to be ethical*'. P481 argued that: '*There have been times in the past where I have done something I have been ashamed of. Afterward I feel very uncomfortable, and anxious. Often this is only relieved if I admit to someone what I have done*'. Holian (2006: 1134), however, warns that sometimes increased awareness of ethical issues can lead to an increased perception of uncertainty, risk and overload, which paralyses decision-making.

Self-knowledge. P210 argued: '*Knowing my values and beliefs and being true and honest*

with myself, and being able to distinguish the right from the wrong, are enablers for me to always strive to be a better person and do the right things', while P449 claimed: '*I feel that by being aware of the influence of ethics on my judgements, I am able to adjust my values and behaviour whenever needed*'. P442 concurred: '*There are times when I have applied my ethics in business at the cost of short-term financial gain, but I have slept well at night and I do not regret for one second having done that. I feel that in the long-term I have made the right decision*'.

Courage and moderation

Self-control. P456 argued that: '*Self control, in this respect, is a matter of choice and personal attitude. Control of noticing feeling at a particular moment, awareness of recognising what is wrong or right and having the courage to act against it or not*'. P455 agreed and stated: '*I am strongly convinced that you always have a choice whether you adapt to your standards or adapt to the environment. By having that choice it also means you are in control*'. P282 believed that '*self control helps to avoid unethical temptations*'. P12 stated: '*I noticed that if someone firmly believes and defends his/her opinion properly, people respect that person more than a person who is always happy to go along with the rest of the group and has never expressed an opinion for himself/herself*'.

Codes of conduct

P282 stated: '*I am an accountant by profession, and the professional body that sets the accounting standards stipulates that accountants must practice by the highest levels of morals, ethics and integrity. I even signed an oath with regards to this*'. April and Wilson (2007) argue that rules not backed up by punishment will normally not be adhered to. In South Africa, the corporate governance guidelines provided by King (1991) are used by most companies to set ethical standards.

Ethics stumbling blocks

Table 2 shows the frequency of the mentioned stumbling blocks (how many times a stumbling block was mentioned, in ascending order) which were listed by our research respondents. Subsequently, the comments are grouped along situational, social psychology lines.

Mood effects (a culture that promotes unethical behaviour)

Organizational culture is clearly a driver for behaviour. P514 wrote: '*I cannot fail to mention that I come from Peru, where unethical behaviour like bribing, are "tools" and common practice to move ahead, when primarily dealing with governmental bureaucracy. To me, it is hard to imagine a business entity, which along their lifetime did not bribe and not only in Peru, but I can attest that in all of Latin America. This might seem tough and dark, but it is reality; furthermore, I believe that given the collective unconsciousness in my mother-home society this is a common practice and some may argue, needed. Western ethical behaviour amidst this scenario will be tough to fulfil*'. P37 justified unethical conduct by stating: '*If a person has no financial option whether or not they stay in the job, it may well serve their interest to accept the unethical manner of doing business, even if it is in contrast to their own moral code*'. P129 also argued that: '*At other times, Lucifer whispers equally sweetly into my ear and tells me that money is good and by working hard, I am actually servicing humanity in my own sweet way!*' P10 argued that: '*Although at a personal level I might consider myself moral or ethical in my conduct, business life poses its own challenges on a daily basis*'. P9 claimed: '*In an organisation, if one is not in a position of power, it is sometimes very difficult to act ethically even if one wants to. One is forced to conform to the organisation's expectations*'. P501 also argued that: '*Another big stumbling block regarding ethics is the feeling that my contribution towards a better world is so*

small, that my effort does not matter'. P35 concurred with P9 and P501, and stated: *'Although I did employ an ethical and moral approach in my own day to day professional activities, I was not placed in a senior enough position where I could challenge those that do things for their own personal gain and recognition within the company. I suppose that this is one of the main reasons why I decided to leave the company at the end of the day'*.

Hurry and Bystander effect
(profits at the expense of service)

P14 also argued that: *'In organisations, I have been involved in dilemmas… It was very definitely a case of profit first and morality, ethics, social responsibility, etc. a distant second'*. P273 stated that: *'Sometimes I become too focused on the bottom-line on a specific project, and then ethical dilemmas that may previously have caused me to rethink my relationship with the client are given less prominence. There are lots of grey areas between what is right and wrong; the lines become even more blurred when focused on the bottom-line'*. P120 believed that making shareholders happy drove him to: *'…manipulate financial results if I can get away with it to make the shareholder happy, or profits at the expense of environmental degradation, and the attainment of huge bonuses as the expense of others'*.

P275 agreed with the view of a life of comfort and claimed: *'One of the driving forces behind my ambition to succeed is to be able to provide for my mom, siblings and children what I never had. In the quest of this, I sometimes lose sight of the bigger picture and adopt a bottom-line mentality'*.

Consistency (honesty and deception)

P275 stated that: *'One of my challenges is exposing the snake in the suit. I know what she is doing is wrong and causing much unhappiness in a few people's lives. I know the right thing to do is to expose her to her superiors at work so that she can be dealt with, and the situation rectified. For years I have been ignoring this, not to upset the apple cart'*. P228 argued: *'I found this quite challenging; working in an environment where corruption is an integral part of daily life in both the public and the private sectors. I resisted offers on some occasions, but on others the offers were too tempting to resist. As I think back, I realise that on those occasions where I did not act ethically, I convinced myself that my efforts alone were likely to be isolated and will do little to fight corruption. I also found solace in the thinking that it was not so bad 'earning' a commission when you acted as a middleman in a corrupt deal. It was the desire to earn another 'buck' that led me into seeking justification for things that were certainly morally incorrect'*. P477 stated: *'When I want immediate or physical gratification, it is amazing to see how I can rationalise my own behaviours and treat those events as if they live in a vacuum, and hence have no impact on my wholeness'*.

Obedience to authority

P446 stated: *'I know I like to be part of a group. I sometimes even adapt myself to become part of certain groups. This sometimes can result in feeling the peer pressure, wanting to change my natural personality. I know though that this peer pressure does not go that far that I will change myself and act against my own values and beliefs'*. P119 concurred and stated: *'My stumbling blocks have been doing what others are doing in a certain situation, not willing to be personally accountable for the decisions'*. P229 also wrote: *'I should have left the company the first time I came to the realisation that I did not approve of the way we did business. I was afraid that I might not find another well-paying job, or I may have to move and start a new life again'*. P93 viewed *'ethical behaviour in the workplace as something that is being driven very strongly by procedures and standards. Unfortunately the compliance to these is not always very good. An example is*

discrimination during recruitment, as well as disciplinary procedures. In the end, the ethics of any business depends on the ethics of the people working in that business, and therefore you need to start with the people'.

Other

P28 stated: '*I have engaged in ethical transgressions against Whites and Blacks alike. I have stood by when jokes and racist remarks were made against a group that was not present'*. P484 agreed and stated: '*I tend to make jokes that are not loving and kind; I have a good sense of humour but use people as part of my jokes, which is wrong'*.

Practical recommendations: ethics

The following recommendations were made by research respondents, as to what can be done as far as ethics and morals are concerned. They listed a number of behaviours and actions which could be taken to encourage and further develop their ethics and morals (how many times a practical action/recommendation was mentioned, in ascending order)—these are listed in ascending order in **Table 3**.

Accept accountability

Seven respondents felt it important to accept accountability as part of improving their ethics.

> *In my experience one's ethical stance is inextricably linked to authenticity, accountability and being in control. Kerns (2003) claims that ethics can be compromised when one is not taking accountability for their actions, or they lack self-control. The capacity to take the ethical path requires a commitment to the value of acting with temperance. Through improving my accountability and internal orientation, I will ensure that my ethical standpoint will never be questioned.*

Act in accordance with my values and beliefs

> *In my definition for ethics, I am not only going to focus on being able to tell what is*

right and wrong, but also being able to act on what I believe to be right.

This guideline ranked first in terms of nominations. Respondents felt that it was extremely important to act in accordance with their values and beliefs, if they were to improve their ethical performance in any way.

> *I will, through practice, act in accordance with what I believe more often and be brave [enough] to disagree with anyone who compromises my beliefs.*

> *I will, through practice, act in accordance with what I believe more often and be brave [enough] to disagree with anyone who compromises my beliefs.*

> *And that is where I think the crux [with] ethics lies. It is not whether you know the difference between 'right' and 'good', it is about whether you know the difference, but choose to ignore it for your own gain. I therefore think that the secret to becoming a better, more ethical person is just to do what you know is right in your heart. If everybody lived [according] to this simple rule, we would have a lot better, happier, more loving world out there.*

One respondent highlighted the fact that she needs to take action, even if she believes that the small role she plays cannot make a difference.

> *The final step is acting on your moral decision. I must have the confidence in my abilities to do what is correct. I have often felt that one person cannot make a difference and therefore I don't even try. However I must recognise that one person can make a difference, even if it is a small difference and therefore I must be willing to act.*

Another questioned himself as to whether his ethical behaviour was driven by principles,

or was based on a fear of consequences. He felt that his true challenge lies in being ethical and acting in accordance with his values and beliefs, even if it went against mainstream thinking.

What became evident under this guideline is that respondents felt they needed clarity on their 'moral code' and 'value proposition' before enacting what they believed to be right.

My goal is to cultivate my moral code according to the purest form of known truth. This means that I must have my perception of 'what is the truth' under a microscope. Tied firmly to this mission is to ensure that my every action matches my moral code. That my decisions are in perfect tandem with my theoretical beliefs of right and wrong.

Act with courage

Respondents highlighted this guideline eleven times. Several felt that they needed to act with courage, especially when going against the flow.

When I feel that I have authority in a matter and where I have influence over others, it is much easier for me to make ethical decisions. However, when I am not in control I find it easier to go with the flow, instead of standing up for what I believe in. I need to become braver and learn that I do not necessarily have to hurt anyone by not going along with his or her decisions.

I will endeavour to stand my ground on ethical issues despite that this has a potential to sideline me and hinder my career progression.

Others mentioned being courageous in terms of setting goals and boundaries for themselves.

My quest is to be more courageous in setting goals and boundaries for myself.

Be open-minded/suspend judgement

I must try not to judge others by my everyday ethical standards.

Two respondents mentioned the importance of not judging others based on their personal ethical standards.

Be open, honest and transparent

The respondents highlighted the importance of being open, honest and transparent as a way to enhance enablers and overcome stumbling blocks within this seed.

In this situation I find [one of] my stumbling blocks is that [I live] in Africa, where bribery is rife, thus leading and encouraging unethical behaviour. I need to speak out and be more transparent with my surroundings and [thereby] allowing me to be true to myself.

Build education and learning into life as much as possible

Six respondents felt that they could take an active role in their ethics progression by focusing on building education and learning into their lives as much as possible.

I plan to take the 'Before the Whistle Blowers' elective course [as part of my] MBA in order to understand the legislative and corporate governance frameworks [controlling] unethical behaviour. This will give me the skills to proactively influence my company's commitment to ethics, and help me make informed decisions on how to encourage ethical behaviour in the workplace. I can be the agent of change in any company I work for.

I have to be open to diverse ethics and keep myself informed and educated at all times, especially when getting in contact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Decrease self-preoccupation

This guideline received only one nomination.

> *I need to have more compassion [for] those who are less fortunate than me. When people ask me for money, I will try to be less selfish and at least give them some of my time even if I cannot give them money.*

Define your sense of purpose

One respondent indicated that she felt it important to seek out purpose in life and to see it in terms of the world and what she could do to change it, given her identified purpose.

Develop and make use of a support network

This guideline received the third most nominations. Several respondents mentioned that they would consider using a mentor to guide their ethical behaviour.

> *Kerns (2003) also recommends wisdom and knowledge as important enablers to distinguish between right and wrong. In this regard, I believe that mentors (Odom and Green, 2003) will serve as a beacon of light and morality, especially when faced with a difficult decision.*

> *In my future career in business, I will have to deal with many ethical issues. My personal action plan that will help me develop the competencies I will need to handle these issues effectively is, firstly, to have a mentor or a positive role model. I will use my mentor as a sounding board whenever I am unsure of the next steps to take - in business, or in life in general.*

Others suggested surrounding themselves with those they believed to have high moral and ethical standards.

> *I will certainly attempt to surround myself with ethical people as this can certainly aid good ethical behaviour, as suggested by Reilly and Myroslaw (1990).*

> *I must become acquainted with, and seek guidance from, those whom I believe live their lives with humility and integrity.*

Do not compromise

Six respondents mentioned that they would never compromise.

> *Svensson and Wood (2003) contend that the activity of examining one's moral standards or the moral standards of a society, and asking how these standards apply to our lives and whether these standards are reasonable or unreasonable. I believe I still have a long way to go when it comes to ethics, especially in view of the alignment and political pressures at work. I will endeavour to stand my ground on ethical issues despite that this has a potential to sideline me and hinder my career progression.*

> *I will never indulge in any activity that could dent my dignity.*

> *Listen to my gut feel. If it does not feel right, it probably is not. No compromises.*

Embrace diversity

Respondents highlighted this guideline nine times. They recognized the fact that different communities have different ethical standards, and these need to be understood and embraced.

> *I will endeavour to explore more ways of identifying perceptions of ethical standards, and also try to accept the standards that I do not agree with.*

> *When I think 'ethics', I need to constantly challenge myself to think outside my own mindset in order that I can accommodate different perspectives and cultures.*

Engage in the philosophical concept of ethics

Four respondents highlighted the fact that it is helpful to engage in the philosophical concept of ethics.

I finally discovered that I have to engage in the philosophical concept of ethics to understand it better.

In understanding the philosophical concept I believe I will be able to implement it sustainably in my life and day-to-day actions.

I believe that it would be more useful to study both the opposing and agreeing value set and, in this way, try to get a better idea of the arguments. It should be easier to construct a stronger argument by analysing both sides. I try to be strongly moral and ethical, but because of my innate curiosity and sceptical bent, I get confused by the blurring lines and grey areas I discover. I've often thought that it would be much easier to live by a simple moral code, such as that which George W. Bush, ex-President of the USA, advocates: a world where everything is black or white, good or evil (his famous 'axis of evil' speech), with or against 'us'. Things are set in stone, there are rules. But rules that are unquestioned are equal to dogma, something I just cannot agree to. I need to question, to search, to wonder – and when I find, I must remember the poet Kahlil Gibran's words, 'say not, "I have found the truth", but rather, "I have found a truth"'.

Exert greater self-discipline

This guideline received five nominations. Respondents felt that by instilling greater self-discipline within themselves, they would be better able to stick to their beliefs and perform in an ethical fashion.

First, do no harm

One respondent felt that a personal rule would be to adapt the well-known Buddhist philosophy of, 'First, do no harm'. This corresponds to the general principles outlined in the religious Ten Commandments, which are acknowledged as being the cornerstone to Western ethics by Ali *et al*. (2004).

Heighten awareness and exposure

Practice constant integrated awareness

'Heighten awareness and exposure' was cited nine times. One respondent felt that she needed to increase her awareness of the fact that her decisions have an effect on others.

The first important step in ethical decision-making is to recognise that your decision has an effect on others. When making a decision we must ask who will be affected by my actions. If a person does not recognise a moral issue they will not employ moral decision-making schemata and instead make the decision according to other schemata, such as economical rationality. I generally am able to recognise that people will be affected by the decisions I make.

Others felt that it was important 'to keep up with the times'.

Be aware of the influence of the times in which I 'currently' live.

Improve self-esteem

Two respondents felt it important to improve their self-esteem.

I would love to leave a legacy that my family and friends can be proud of, more especially, my son. But, I am also aware that as a human being, I am bound to fall into temptation. However, be that as it may, I have an equal amount of power to overcome temptations. In case I fall down, I must learn to stand up, lift my head up and walk tall, never looking back.

Learn from your mistakes

This guideline was listed three times.

I've been in trouble with the law before, and was fortunate enough to get away without a criminal record... I have never broken the law since.

Operate in environments that support ethical behaviour

Four respondents felt it would help them enhance their ethical performance if they did their best to operate only in environments that support ethical behaviour.

> *Another useful tool that, in the future, would empower me to continue practising these values is finding a work environment that allows and supports ethical behaviour.*

Practice an internal locus of control

Two respondents found it necessary to practice an internal locus of control.

> *In my experience, one's ethical stance is inextricably linked to authenticity, accountability and being in control. Kerns (2003) claims that ethics can be compromised when one is not taking accountability for their actions or they lack self-control. The capacity to take the ethical path requires a commitment to the value of acting with temperance. Through improving my accountability, and internal orientation, I will ensure that my ethical standpoint will never be questioned.*

Practice forgiveness

One respondent mentioned that he would like to practice forgiveness: 'first on myself and then on others'.

Practice reflection, meditation and mindfulness

This guideline was cited eleven times.

> *I will be mindful of everything happening around me and continue being resolute in my beliefs of right and wrong.*

> *Acting in an ethical way requires more than simply knowing what is right. Knowing what is right but failing to act upon this knowledge still constitutes*

unethical behaviour. It is important, therefore, that I am honest with myself and that I reflect upon my actions.

> *Being in the present, and noticing my body sensations, helps me to sense what is right and what is wrong. Usually my body does not lie – I just have to be open to such intuition.*

Religion/spirituality

Religion/spirituality received the fourth most mentions.

> *The adage goes that without God everything is justifiable, so people can never be held accountable for their actions. God demands fairness and that we do what is right and good (Is. 56:1) because, in the end, we will all be judged (Rev. 20:12). It is the standard I have set for my life because I'll be held to account.*

> *Instead of determining my ethics by what is socially acceptable, I need to ask myself what is acceptable to God. Failing to do so, ethics becomes nothing more than etiquette, a reflection of time- and spatial-specific norms. Without genuine integrity and 'fundamental character strength', life's challenges will eventually expose my true motives (Covey, 2004: 22).*

Continuous improvement, not destination perfection

One respondent recognized this guideline.

> *As I have become aware of and acknowledged this tendency, I have been able to challenge myself to stand up for myself and not lie. I am also realising that I do not have to always accept responsibility for how other people feel, and this assists me in being truthful even if I know that it may hurt others. Accepting that I do not always have to do everything right, and that it is*

normal to fail at times, allows me to be more honest about my failures to others.

Increase self-awareness

This guideline received the second most mentions. Most respondents discussed the importance of checking their values and refining them if necessary.

Ethics have always been important to me and I was brought up with a strong set of values. I think that this helped me to get through some difficult periods in my life. As I move on through my life, and from continent to continent, I will regularly have to make a reality check on my set of values and readjust when necessary.

I recognise that to attain effective self-leadership I must be able to determine what I stand for, and have a system of reviewing these as, and when, time and space allow.

Others felt that by being fully self-aware, they would be in a better position to stand their ground.

If I know what is right and what is wrong I will be able to stand my ground in any situation and defend this.

Share knowledge and learning with others

Two respondents felt that it was a good idea to share knowledge and learning with others.

My family up-bringing and education to date has made working at this company easy. This is endorsed by Fransworth and Kleiner (2003: 130–140) when they stated that 'education serves to reinforce existing values and encourage their application. Early education experiences and family influences are going to have the most crucial impacts on the integrity of future

business leaders and their willingness and ability to be value driven'. My personal challenge is to ensure that I pass on to my children the true value of abiding by their ethics.

As a transformational leader I must serve as a role model of ethical behaviour, 'if I achieve that a positive culture will permeate the whole organization' (Odom and Green, 2003).

Treat others as you would like to be treated

This guideline was listed six times.

In order to become more ethical, I need to make a deliberate choice to apply the Golden Rule in my daily life, namely 'Do for others just what you want them to do for you' (Luke 6:31).

Conclusion

Locus of control is defined as a personality construct reflecting one's belief or perception about who controls one's behaviour and life events (Connolly, 1980). It was the generalized belief of the majority of our research respondents that behavioural outcomes are under one's personal control (internal locus), rather than depending on outside forces, luck or powerful others (external locus) (Rotter, 1966). Individual behaviour, we found, is bound by contextual constraints and ethics, therefore, essentially it is a methodological attempt to make sense of our individual and social moral experience, such that rules for governing (constraining) human conduct, rules identifying the societal values worth pursuing (constraint), and the character traits deserving development (constraint) are highlighted and made to be the norm. Social constructs can be seen as representations of cooperation and coordination, based on intertwined habits and mutual commitments, which are often expressed in sign structures

such as agreements and plans (Helmhout *et al.*, 2003). Social constructs guide the formation and reinforcement of habits of individual actors that are aimed at cooperation, coordination and socially accepted behaviour, and can be modelled based on concepts and methods used in organizational semiotics (Helmhout *et al.*, 2003). Despite the positive spin-offs alluded to above, such as cooperation and coordination, the research respondents identified, in the main, organizations and society as stumbling blocks, which they often had to tolerate to be able to, for instance, meet their financial commitments, at the expense of fulfilment, self-worth, authenticity and ethical living. Socially acceptable behaviours are thus not necessarily embraced as a positive spin-off, but are detested due to the negative feelings (low self-esteem and fear) that they generate. Bandura (1986) identified self-efficacy as, perhaps, the single most important factor in promoting changes in behaviour. Individuals who challenge the status *quo*, order of things, or seek to shift the constraints, may suffer personally though. Despite literature suggesting that individuals can rise above their circumstances through their own independent will, fear is a very dominant stumbling block with respect to ethics, with significant concentration in the behavioural construct sphere. Power does not rest in one's belief about one's locus of control only, but action emanating from such belief is often required. Our research highlighted the fact that such action was often inward-focused, i.e., drawing strength from one's upbringing, one's defining moments, one's spirituality, one's conscience, exercising self-control, using honesty, courage and integrity, standing up for one's beliefs, as well as using mentors to lean on (enabling individuals) and to encourage one to uphold codes of conduct. Our respondents emphasized the fact that such action often counted as some of their most difficult life experiences, which when reflected upon and learnt from, became the crucibles that forged their characters, developed their internal powers, and gave them a sense of freedom to handle difficult circumstances in the future, and to

inspire others to do so as well (enabling environments).

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