

What makes us choose to act ethically?

By Kurt April

A recent study involving 646 middle managers who were enrolled on MBA programmes at the UCT Graduate School of Business and the Erasmus University (Netherlands) has revealed that ethical action is most often a result of people drawing on their inner values and life experiences.

The objective of the research was to understand what obstacles stand in the way of people acting according to their existing, and often extensive, knowledge of what constitutes moral and ethical behaviour. In addition, the question of what encourages and enables individuals to live and act ethically, was posed.

The top three enablers of ethical action were upbringing, spirituality, and having good mentors and role models. Other enablers listed were: honesty, courage and integrity; self-control; conscience; standing up for one's own beliefs; codes of conduct; self-knowledge; and defining moments.

On the other hand, what emerged from the research is that a bottom-line mentality, organisational influences, fear, and peer pressure are the top four very real and dominant stumbling blocks to ethical conduct.

In their responses, research participants made some interesting comments about the nature of the enablers and stumbling blocks in their lives.

Respondents reported on the positive influences in their upbringing with feedback such as: "I have the good fortune to have been guided by my mother who taught me to live a life based on consideration for 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."

Another respondent highlighted how religion has played a role; saying that their "sense of right and wrong has been


greatly influenced" by their religion. On the importance of mentors, one commented that, "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."

In describing stumbling blocks to choosing to behave ethically, a respondent mentioned that a bottom-line mentality can sometimes be caused by one's desire to provide for one's family; another pointed out that the pressure of having no financial option may cause one to betray one's own moral code. One comment captures how fear can cause people to stay silent: "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-paid job, or I may have to move and start a new life again".

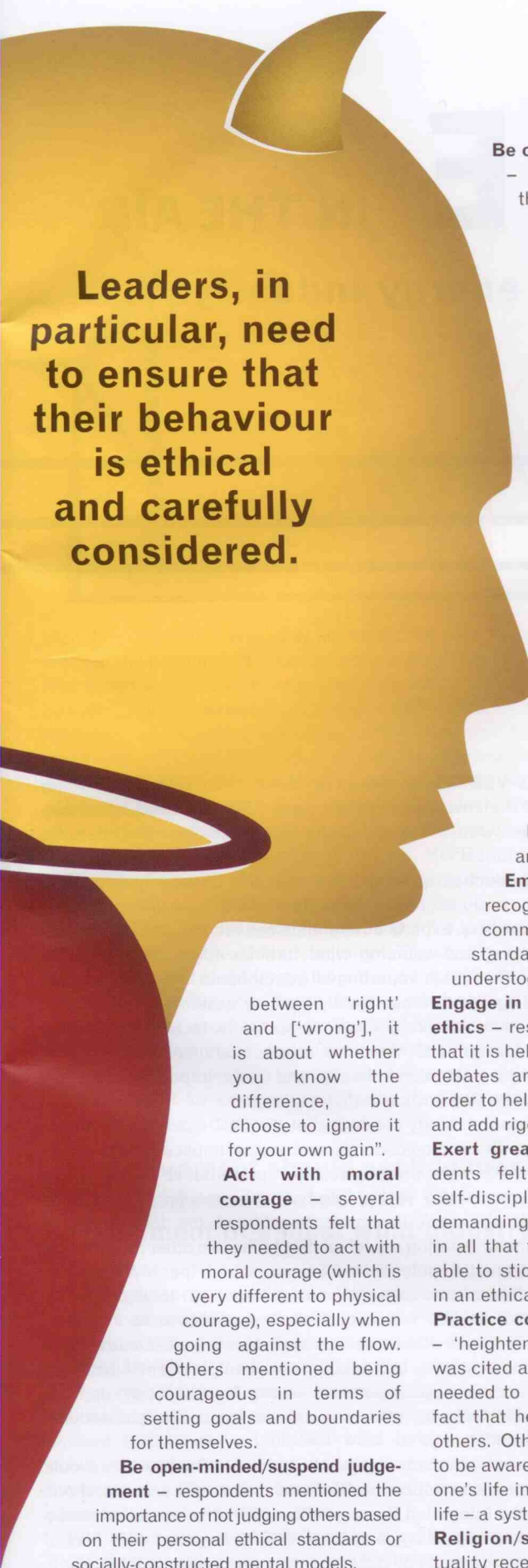
In analysing the managers' responses, a number of key lessons emerged – they listed a number of behaviours and actions which could be taken to encourage and further develop their ethics and morals. These included: **Accept accountability** – respondents felt it important to accept accountability as part of improving their ethics. 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.

Act in accordance with my values and beliefs – as one respondent put it: "... that is where I think the crux [of] ethics lies. It is not whether you know the difference



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between 'right' and ['wrong'], it is about whether you know the difference, but choose to ignore it for your own gain".

Act with moral courage – several respondents felt that they needed to act with moral courage (which is very different to physical courage), especially when going against the flow.

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

Be open-minded/suspend judgement – respondents mentioned the importance of not judging others based on their personal ethical standards or socially-constructed mental models.

Be open, honest and transparent

– the respondents highlighted the importance of being open, honest and transparent as ways to enhance enablers and overcome the stumbling blocks.

Build education and learning into life as much as possible

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

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.

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

Embrace diversity – respondents recognised the fact that different communities have different ethical standards, and these need to be understood and embraced.

Engage in the philosophical concept of ethics – respondents highlighted the fact that it is helpful to engage in philosophical debates and discussions on ethics, in order to help clarify their own perspectives and add rigour to their own understanding.

Exert greater self-discipline – respondents felt that by instilling greater self-discipline within themselves, and demanding excellence from themselves in all that they do, they would be better able to stick to their beliefs and perform in an ethical fashion.

Practice constant integrated awareness – 'heightened awareness and exposure' was cited and one respondent felt that she needed to increase her awareness of the fact that her decisions have an effect on others. Others felt that it was important to be aware of the impact of one aspect of one's life in relation to other parts of one's life – a systemic, personal awareness.

Religion/spirituality – religion/spirituality received the fourth most mentions;

a number of respondents felt it was integral to them behaving ethically.

Increase self-awareness – this guideline received the second most mentions. Most respondents discussed the importance of checking their values and refining them if necessary according to the current priorities in one's life. Others felt that by being fully self-aware, they would be in a better position to stand their ground.

As businesses globally become aware of the need to operate differently in a highly competitive environment, ethical behaviour is coming increasingly under the spotlight. Leaders, in particular, need to ensure that their behaviour is ethical and carefully considered as they are in a position to affect other peoples' lives through their influence or power. The leaders who become truly powerful are those who lead as whole people. Nelson Mandela, for example, is held up as an outstanding example of a leader who did not, and does not, separate his deeply-held values and principles from his actions; and, in so doing, he embodies the essence of ethical leadership. Power, therefore, does not rest in one's belief about one's locus of control only, but in the action emanating from such belief as well.

The research respondents were loud and clear about the fact that those times when they have behaved ethically, rather than taking an easier path, especially in an unsupportive environment, were amongst some of their most difficult life experiences. Yet, when they looked back and examined the lessons learned, the choices made, the way they acted then helped forge their characters, developed their internal strength and inner compass, and gave them added confidence in their ability to handle difficult choices in the future. And, perhaps even more valuable, is that their experiences have given them a sense of freedom to inspire others to behave in the same way.

Kurt April is a Professor of Leadership, Diversity and Inclusion at the UCT GSB. The research was conducted with Kai Peters, Chief Executive of Ashridge Business School (United Kingdom); and Kirsten Locke and Caroline Mlambo of the UCT GSB. It was published in the Journal of Public Affairs in August 2010.