

Wearing two different hats: Moral decisions may depend on the situation

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An individual's sense of right or wrong may change depending on their activities at the time – and they may not be aware of their own shifting moral integrity — according to a new study looking at why people make ethical or unethical decisions.

Focusing on dual-occupation professionals, the researchers found that engineers had one perspective on ethical issues, yet when those same individuals were in management roles, their [moral](#) compass shifted. Likewise, medic/soldiers in the U.S. Army had different views of civilian casualties depending on whether they most recently had been acting as soldiers or medics.

In the study, to be published in a future issue of *The Academy of Management Journal*, lead author Keith Leavitt of Oregon State University found that workers who tend to have dual roles in their jobs would change their moral judgments based on what they thought was expected of them at the moment.

"When people switch hats, they often switch moral compasses," Leavitt said. "People like to think they are inherently moral creatures – you either have character or you don't. But our studies show that the same person may make a completely different decision based on what hat they may be wearing at the time, often without even realizing it."

Leavitt, an assistant professor of management in the College of Business at OSU, is an expert on non-conscious decision making and business

ethics. He studies how people make decisions and moral judgments, often based on non-conscious cues.

He said recent high-profile business scandals, from the collapse of Enron to the Ponzi scheme of Bernie Madoff, have called into question the ethics of professionals. Leavitt said professional organizations, employers and academic institutions may want to train and prepare their members for practical moral tensions they may face when asked to serve in multiple roles.

"What we consider to be moral sometimes depends on what constituency we are answering to at that moment," Leavitt said. "For a physician, a human life is priceless. But if that same physician is a managed-care administrator, some degree of moral flexibility becomes necessary to meet their obligations to stockholders."

Leavitt said subtle cues – such as signage and motivation materials around the office – should be considered, along with more direct training that helps employees who juggle multiple roles that could conflict with one another.

"Organizations and businesses need to recognize that even very subtle images and icons can give employees non-conscious clues as to what the firm values," he said. "Whether they know it or not, people are often taking in messages about what their role is and what is expected of them, and this may conflict with what they know to be the moral or correct decision."

The researchers conducted three different studies with employees who had dual roles. In one case, 128 U.S. Army medics were asked to complete a series of problem-solving tests, which included subliminal cues that hinted they might be acting as either a medic or a soldier. No participant said the cues had any bearing on their behavior – but

apparently they did. A much larger percentage of those in the medic category than in the soldier category were unwilling to put a price on human life.

In another test, a group of engineer-managers were asked to write about a time they either behaved as a typical manager, engineer, or both. Then they were asked whether U.S. firms should engage in "gifting" to gain a foothold in a new market. Despite the fact such a practice would violate federal laws, more than 50 percent of those who fell into the "manager" category said such a practice might be acceptable, compared to 13 percent of those in the engineer category.

"We find that people tend to make decisions that may conflict with their morals when they are overwhelmed, or when they are just doing routine tasks without thinking of the consequences," Leavitt said. "We tend to play out a script as if our role has already been written. So the bottom line is, slow down and think about the consequences when making an ethical decision."

Provided by Oregon State University

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