

Avoidance or responsible moral choices—what is your supervisor like?

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A study conducted in the Department of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä asked Finnish leaders to describe the moral decision-making in their working life. Based on their answers, four moral identity statuses were identified: achieved (34%), foreclosed (30%), diffused (23%), and

moratorium (13%).

"An achieved [moral identity](#) is the most desirable option for work-related ethical decision-making," says Mari Huhtala, a postdoctoral researcher from the Department of Psychology.

An achieved identity describes leaders who follow a clear, self-chosen value framework. They had committed to their personal values and applied them in a flexible yet responsible way in their work. Leaders with foreclosed identities, on the other hand, also had a clear and strong framework, but it was based on values adopted from others. For example, they described following organizational values and norms without critically evaluating them.

"If a company's values are not morally sound, a foreclosed identity can be a risk for unethical behavior," Huhtala explains. "In this case the leader can find him- or herself operating in a 'moral gray zone', for example by striving to maximize profit with no reference to critical and [moral reasoning](#)."

The studied leaders were also identified to have diffused and moratorium identities. A diffused moral identity was depicted by a lack of a clear value framework. According to the researchers, diffusion was often related to avoiding ethical decisions.

"These leaders described making decisions solely based on facts and numbers, which means that the moral dimension of the situation is downplayed. They also said that they shift responsibility of the situation to someone else, such as to their own supervisor," Huhtala says.

If the leader is capable of actively exploring and comparing different moral perspectives, the leader represents identity moratorium. When a person is trying to find their own values, one might ask questions a

number of questions: What is important and meaningful to you? What are the values that you want to base your work on?

Moral identity can be developed

What to do if your own identity does not seem to support moral actions at work? Researchers say that identity development does not have fixed end points. Instead, identity develops throughout adulthood.

"Modern [working life](#) should acknowledge the importance of moral values as a part of responsible practices more," Huhtala says. "Leaders and employees should be offered different opportunities to develop their personal moral consciousness. This could be done through training, consulting, and everyday practices within the work community. One example would be to reflect on personal experiences in order to learn more about them and to increase ethical sensitivity."

According to the researchers, future studies should investigate how moral identity develops over time. What could initiate change, facilitate the critical evaluation of previous commitments, and explore new value alternatives?

The study was conducted in the Department of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä. It was based on focus group discussions among 16 supervisors and on a questionnaire study, which included 180 leaders. The study is a part of the project Moral work [identity](#): How ethical dilemmas at work and ethical organizational culture shape its development, funded by the Academy of Finland.

More information: Mari Huhtala et al, Applying the Identity Status Paradigm to Managers' Moral Identity, *Scandinavian Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.16993/sjwop.50](https://doi.org/10.16993/sjwop.50)

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