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***Moral Courage in Organizations: Doing the Right Thing at Work* by Debra R. Comer and Gina Vega (Eds.)**

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The premise and approach for this volume of essays about moral courage in organizations are unique, but almost obvious at the same time. Rather than taking the typical approach of discussing why people do “bad” things and warning students and managers against those hazards, this book takes a more positive approach and focuses on stories and examples of everyday heroes who show moral courage by standing up for the “right” thing. It seems almost intuitive that describing scenarios involving individuals who stand up to their organizations against popular opinion may be more instructive than organizing another set of essays about the hazards of unethical behavior. As a result of Comer and Vega’s approach, this volume of essays has much to offer the professor, the practitioner, and the public.

Comer and Vega begin their book by calling attention to the instructional status quo: “A typical course in business or professional ethics, or a standard organizational ethics training program seems to be that advising students or employees to pay attention to ethical considerations and to harness the ideas of moral philosophers will help ensure that they display morally stellar behavior” (2011, p. xv). The authors identify a knowing–acting gap resulting from the mismatch between moral motivation and moral courage. It is simply not enough to know what needs to be done; we need to do what is right, despite the personal costs.

PART 1: THE ORGANIZATIONAL PRESSURES THAT MAKE MORAL COURAGE NECESSARY

The first of the three chapters in this section, “A Short Primer on Moral Courage,” starts with a philosophical discussion of moral courage; Al Gini discusses ethics and the issues of work and self. Key to Gini’s argument is that our sense of self is invested in rugged individualism and a focus on ambition and personal success. Drawing upon Robert Jackall’s work, Gini points out the dangers of moral behaviors being determined by the needs of an organization. Gini

ends the chapter with a warning about the need to recognize the community in which we live and make choices that benefit that community. For any community to be a success, its members need to have the moral courage to support its values.

David Callahan, the author of *The Cheating Culture*, teams up with Comer for a question and answer session for Chapter 2. The ensuing discussion ranges from why our culture is the way it is, to what we as educators and theorists can do about it. Callahan maintains that the recent financial crisis has shifted our culture away from the relentless pursuit of the bottom line. A result of this change is that there is less “stuff” now for people to own. Therefore, we have taken a step back, and many of us have taken stock of what has happened. Callahan sees a new reality where decisions such as President Obama’s expansion of AmeriCorps may lead the way to a new sense of community. Comer and Callahan wrap up the chapter on an optimistic note by emphasizing that there is evidence that the Millennials show signs of being more level-headed, which is illustrated by their demeanor where “wealth is less exalted and self-interest is less triumphant” (p. 23).

The purpose of Comer and Vega’s third chapter, “The Personal Ethical Threshold,” is to introduce the concept of the *personal ethical threshold*. Based on the premise that we all want to do the right thing, the authors state we are more likely to abandon our moral principles when *situational pressures* to act against our standards are very high and when the cost of doing so is too great, or when the *moral intensity* is low so that not doing the right thing will have minimal negative consequences.

Using situations pulled from the movies and real life, the authors illustrate their argument. They conclude that the two concepts of dissonance reduction and desensitization allow us to ignore our moral courage and avoid doing the right thing. Tying this all together is a 10-question, scenario-based questionnaire where higher scores indicate the likelihood of following individual moral compasses even when it would be easier not to follow them. The quiz and the score provide a great beginning for discussions about moral courage and our choices. The authors strongly recommend completing the quiz and using any resultant discussions to help frame the rest of the book.

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PART TWO: THE FACES OF MORAL COURAGE

This section is divided into five chapters and begins with a discussion on how risk, reward, and moral hazard may influence ethical actions in the business world. In Chapter 4, “How the Mighty Have Fallen,” Vega defines risk as “venturing into the unknown”; reward as the “consequence for actions initiated or completed”; and moral hazard as “the lack of incentive to guard against risk when you are protected against the risk” (p. 49). Vega illustrates how these three concepts can have disastrous consequences when the subsequent motivations that arise are not tempered with moral courage, through the retelling of the stories of Bernie Madoff, the Mortgage Meltdown, and Enron. In a critique of a materialistic culture, Vega proposes that there are four myths that help explain why our mighty continue to fail. It is clear from this discussion that “our personal limitations are exacerbated by temptation, situational pressures, and a search for the easy way out” (p. 58).

In the subsequent four chapters, the authors illustrate stories of individuals who had moral courage and did not take the easy way out—sometimes at great personal expense personally and professionally. In Chapter 5, “For the Greater Good: The Moral Courage of Whistleblowers,” Stephen Kohn’s discussion on whistleblowers begins with the story of FBI Agent Frederic Whitehurst and his epic battle with his superiors, the FBI, and ultimately the Department of Justice (DOJ) to do the right thing in the FBI’s forensic crime laboratory. The author describes how the actions of one FBI agent were concerned with the greater good of the organization, the government, and ultimately his fellow humankind. Kohn’s example depicts whistleblowers as agents of change in ethically deficient organizational environments, who render change from the bottom up.

Jeffrey McDonald discusses why a sense of calling matters and how it can influence moral courage at work in Chapter 6, “Faith and Moral Courage: Why a Sense of Calling Matters.” According to the author, a calling may provide the individual confidence to take certain risks. This confidence rests on “three assumptions: (1) God will provide; (2) worldly affairs have an ultimate significance; and (3) integrity—both personal and organizational—is worthy of personal costs” (p. 78). As a result of a calling, MacDonald argues, individuals often will choose to work for organizations that have aligned missions with their personal beliefs.

In Chapter 7, “The Social Entrepreneur: Combining Head and Heart to Find Innovative Solutions to Local Problems,” Roland E. Kidwell discusses the social entrepreneur by examining three organizations to construct general characteristics of social organizations and how they relate to moral courage. Kidwell describes the social entrepreneur as someone “with passion about the venture, care about the people affected by it, and reinforcement through successful results” (p. 92). The author argues that individuals who undertake social enterprises often do so at great peril to their own convenience and finances.

Judith White presents profiles of three individuals who lead nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Burma in Chapter 8,

“NGO Leaders on the Edge: The Moral Courage to Fight for Human Rights.” She argues that these individuals exhibit moral courage as they seek to develop civil society and democracy. White argues that moral courage is the willingness to stand by moral principles, even in the face of opposition or danger. She differentiates physical harm from moral courage, writing, “Physical courage involves the willingness to suffer physical harm, but by itself does not require acting on a set of moral principles” (p. 102). More importantly however, White uses these NGO leaders to illustrate moral courage often requires personal and professional sacrifice. Moreover, even when one does the right thing, the results are often not immediate.

PART 3: THE SKILLS AND INFORMATION THAT ENABLE MORAL COURAGE

This section of the book discusses what it takes to be able to use moral courage for change. Mary C. Gentile discusses “Giving Voice to Values: Building Moral Competence” in Chapter 9. Gentile argues that there are several challenges to building moral competencies, but business professionals can overcome these by creating value scripts that establish default moral positions. This can be accomplished by actively voicing business positions in ethical norms in everyday situations that express our morals and values. Gentile argues that creating these scripts allows business professionals to overcome challenges, but also makes it easier to voice ethical positions that pave the way to leading acting with moral courage.

The team of Leslie E. Sekerka, Justin D. McCarthy, and Richard P. Bagozzi look at our military in the chapter, “Developing Professional Moral Courage: Leadership Lessons from Everyday Ethical Challenges in Today’s Military.” In this chapter, Sekerka et al. define professional moral courage and its competencies as demonstrated in managerial behaviors and decision-making processes in a military organization. They describe the competencies of professional moral courage through the four governance practices of management that include emotional signaling, reflective pause, self-regulation, and moral preparation. They argue that although individuals contribute to the moral environment, leaders cultivate moral strength by practicing professional courage on a daily basis.

In the final chapter of this section, Judith W. Pain discusses some of the rules and regulations that can protect those who stand up and do the right thing in “Stand Up and Be Counted: Legal Protections for Those Who Act with Moral Courage.” Following the professional lives of a fictitious couple, David and Elaine, Pain examines the various ways that the state and federal labor laws provide protection in a variety of employee relationships and scenarios. In a great juxtaposition, Pain paints the morally courageous option and contrasts this with the legal protections that may be afforded in certain situations. This chapter, while focused on laws and legislation that are designed to protect employees from unethical behavior, also serves as a reminder to organizations to do the right thing.

PART 4: CHANGING ORGANIZATIONS WITH MORAL COURAGE

The final section of the book pulls together the previous sections and discusses how to change organizations from the top down in “Changing Organizations with Moral Courage.” Starting with Bernard Matt and Nasrin Shahinpoor’s chapter “Speaking Truth to Power, The Courageous Organizational Dissenter,” the authors begin discussing the concept of dissention, the idea of contentious dissenters, and the importance of speaking up. Presenting an alternative perspective, Matt and Shahinpoor look at the movie *A Few Good Men* and examine how difficult it is for a dissenter to speak out. The authors reinforce the idea that organizations should embrace and not shun dissenters, despite the fact that it is easier to criticize than to understand the motivations of the dissenter. It takes courage to step up and speak out, and it takes courage for management to listen to a dissenter’s message. Truly ethical organizations embrace their dissenters as the heroes they really represent to the organization.

Speaking out involves considerable moral courage. A conscientious dissenter is in some ways stronger than a whistleblower because a conscientious dissenter remains within the organization and tries to fix the problems from within the organization. In a perfect corporate world, dissention would be “expected, invited and rewarded” (p. 164). The transformation begins once an organization can see the dissenter as bringing opportunities for improvement.

The second chapter in this section is “I Defy with a Little Help from my Friends: Raising an Organization’s Ethical Bar Through a Morally Courageous Coalition” by Debra R. Comer and Susan D. Baker. The authors set the stage by discussing situations where moral courage may be needed but where employees are reluctant to step up, or are unsuccessful when they do step up. Comer and Baker identify two reasons for this lack of involvement; either the employees do not believe their reporting problems will make a difference, or they fear retaliation on the part of management.

This chapter highlights the idea that by banding together, employees can make a difference even without managerial support. In fact, a group of employees who are committed to working together in solidarity can overcome managerial mismanagement. Focusing on principled dissenters, the authors explore the idea of forming coalitions and working together to effect change from the inside out.

Comer and Baker point out that employees are more likely to find their strength in ethical front-line managers and supervisors, and not top management. They then provide a series of steps to “build rapport, reinforce your message and convey hope” (p. 180) in order to form a morally courageous coalition. Step one is the contemplation of the issues you are facing; two, observation of the options and possible outcomes; and three, preparation to recruit your coalition. “Build rapport, reinforce your message and convey hope” (p. 180).

The final chapter in this section is written by Dennis J. Moberg, entitled “The Organizational Context of Moral Courage: Creating Environments That Account for Dual-Processing Models of Courageous Behaviors.” Using two case studies, Moberg explores the context of courage, supporting the idea that moral courage does not always involve grand events. Moral courage can be quiet. Moral courage can be deliberate or it can be impulsive, but it is always identified once it happens. These are also known as hot and cool processes. The author reviews the three types of models identified by moral psychologists—social intuitionist, chronic accessibility, and expert decision. Using these models, Moberg discusses risk and return and capability assessments, timing, and contingency plans. “Whether it is impulse (hot) or skill (cool), genuine courage rarely fails to impress. Nurturing it requires an environment that encourages employees to aspire to function ‘at their best’” (p. 203).

Drawing upon the organizational horror stories of Kenneth Lay and Enron, and the fiscal crisis of the last several years, the editors have created a book that seeks to guide students and practitioners to make the right decisions by helping them to develop the tools that will allow them to do so. There are many paths for individuals to display their moral courage. However, organizations also have an opportunity to foster courage in their environment. In the end, that is what this book is really all about, creating the environment that enables courage and doing the right thing. The fact that it does so through positive examples and strong, well-written essays is an added bonus.

REFERENCE

Comer, D. R., & Vega, G. (Eds.). 2011. *Moral courage in organizations: Doing the right thing at work*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

James V. M. L. Holzer is a doctor of management degree candidate at the University of Maryland, University College. The focus of his dissertation, tentatively titled “Strategy Development in U.S. Federal Agencies: Insights from the Miles and Snow Typology Applied to Four U.S. Federal Agencies,” is on public and private-sector differences. He is the Director, Disclosure and FOIA Operations, in the Privacy Office at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

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