A Case Study for Ethical Leadership Decision Making
The Corpsman

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You are CAPT Jones in command of a Marine platoon, part of a large three-battalion operation in a compact urban area. Your platoon is one of 40 sweeping the city from east to west. The city is bordered on the west by a wide swift river that runs into an ocean directly south. You are to move from east to west along the line of advance, keeping pace with the other platoons. Moving through a neighborhood, you are searching for and clearing enemy insurgents. Adjacent units north and south of you are doing the same.

Based on recent experience and the mood of the city, planners strongly believe the enemy will flee rather than fight. They cannot run north, being hemmed in by impassible mountains, or escape southward because of the ocean.

The idea is to advance through the city as quickly as possible, pushing the enemy into a kill box—undeveloped land near the river—where air support can come into play, killing or forcing surrender. Either way, valuable results will follow: a significant reduction in the number and morale of the enemy and valuable intelligence extracted from prisoners. Additionally, this operation, if successful, will help build the confidence of the non-combatant populace, something that is vital to the overall counterinsurgency campaign.

Marine and civilian casualties, along with prisoners, are being sent well to the rear, accompanied by corpsmen when necessary. Once casualties are evacuated, corpsmen return to their companies as soon as possible.

The fighting has been much more intense than expected. The enemy is desperate. None surrender. Your platoon has lost all its corpsmen, except one. You have already evacuated several badly injured Marines and some civilians. You expect the intense combat to continue.

You emphasize to your one remaining corpsman, HM1 Smith, that he is to take care of as much in the field as he can, evacuating only in the worst of circumstances.

During a particularly bloody firefight, five of your men break into an apartment located on the third floor of one of the many apartment buildings bordering the street. Intense automatic weapons fire had come from that area, killing one of your men.

They have discovered that insurgents used the room as a torture chamber and prison. There are decayed corpses in the room, and one young boy, no more than 10 years old, is still alive. Unfed, with grievous injuries, he pleads for help. When you and HM1 Smith rush to the room, the sight is shocking. You've seen a lot of things,

but never anything quite like this. Smith examines the boy.

You ask Smith if it is possible to evacuate him. He shakes his head, "I'm not sure. These wounds are gangrenous, he's slipping in and out of consciousness, and seems to have internal bleeding. I am certain if he doesn't get surgery soon he will die."

If the boy is evacuated, Smith will have to accompany him. He doesn't need to remind you that he's the only person with medical expertise left in your platoon. With the ongoing fight, if you order Smith to evacuate the child, there will be no medical asset until he returns. And with the continuing firefight your Marines will be more vulnerable without medical presence.

There is no way of knowing how long Smith might be gone. Regardless, that time will be significant. You hate to think it, but what if this boy is already lost? Should you assuage your conscience by attempting the evacuation? Would that act be self-indulgent? Even Smith can't be sure whether the boy has a chance. What can be done for any Marines who might be injured during his absence.

Should you leave the boy and order Smith to stay with the platoon as you fight your way out of the area? That would certainly be consistent with plans and orders. It would create the best chance for the mission's success

and not remove your most valuable medical resource.

You can report the boy's location to a rescue team. Of course, given his condition, this will likely result in his death. He is obviously in agony. A rescue team will have to fight their way in and he doesn't have that kind of time. You are here now. You have Smith. He can get the boy to safety. You could save his life. All you need to do is call in a Humvee. Aren't you supposed to look out for the defenseless, even at risk of your own safety or the safety of men under your command? Isn't that part of the warrior code?

Even though only a minute or two had elapsed since examining the boy, the time seems interminable until you hear Smith's voice cutting through your thoughts, "Orders, Captain?"

You curse under your breath, sigh, look at the young victim, then at the scene beyond the window, and at your awaiting corpsman.

What would you do?

Ethical Leadership Decision Model

Research has shown that people proceed through a series of stages when processing an ethical decision. The stages move from an initial recognition or awareness of morally salient features of environment—that is, problem situations—to a probing of possible courses of action that would resolve the problem, to an exploration of the consequences of the proposed solutions, and a resultant decision to act or refrain from acting. The research shows that ethical, social, and psychological factors affect the process at each one of these stages. Psychological and social factors can exert influence without our being aware of them. Sometimes these influences lead to good choices, sometimes to ill. The model shown, based on sound theory and validated by Dr. Holmes's research, is one approach in making practical, pragmatic decisions quickly, with conscious and deliberate awareness of these factors. This increases the

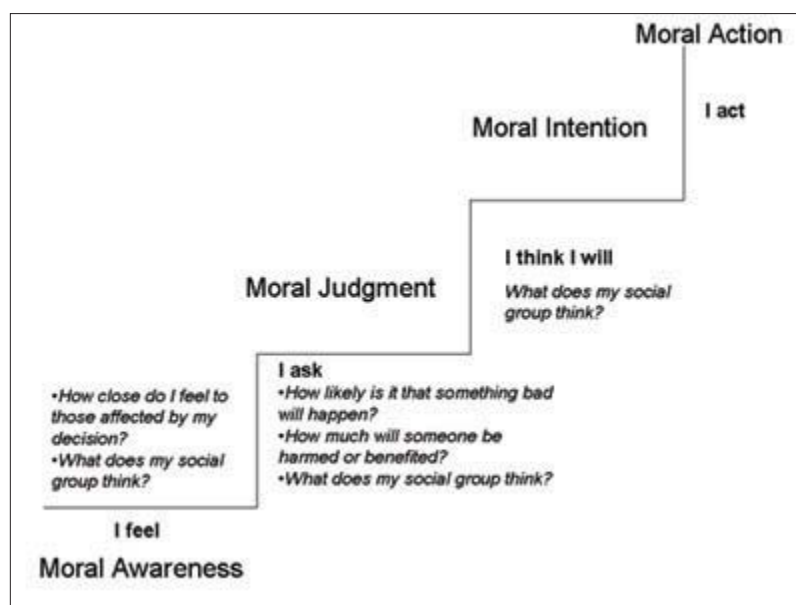likelihood of making sound moral choices, even in difficult circumstances.

This four-step approach is based on James Rest's Model (1986), along with Thomas Jones' (1991) idea that moral intensity factors influence each of those components. For example, how much someone is harmed or benefited by the decision-maker's actions may influence the decision, as well as how much the social group agrees that a given action is good or bad. How close the decision-maker feels to the people affected by the decision and the probability that something harmful will occur can also color decision making. By asking questions that probe those moral intensity factors, the decision-maker becomes aware of how they may be affecting decision making.

To make an ethical decision, a person works through the stages in the process, moving from moral awareness to moral action. In the first stage, there is gut-level recognition that the situation is morally charged. Anger, fear, anxiety, concern, and/or empathy are aroused. The decision-maker's gut is answering the question: "Is there something wrong here?" Two moral intensity factors—proximity (how close the decision-maker feels to the people affected) and social consensus

(whether a social group perceives a given action as right or wrong)—can influence whether the decision-maker identifies an ethical issue. Becoming reflexively (consciously or "meta-cognitively") aware of these influences can help one correct for oversensitivity or insensitivity in such cases.

Assuming that the decision-maker identifies an ethical issue, he or she begins to weigh various options in the next stage. The aim is to distinguish right from wrong, better from worse, and between competing obligations. The decision-maker is weighing possible actions. Moral intensity factors such as magnitude of consequences (how much someone is harmed or benefited by the decision-maker's action), probability of effect (the likelihood that predicted circumstances and expected level of harm or benefit will occur), and social consensus play roles in this stage of the process.

The next stage builds on the results of the last. In this stage, the person must decide what to do or not do. Sometimes choosing not to act is a valid decision. Deciding what to do also means marshaling the courage to act or not act, sometimes in the face of great opposition. In deciding to act, research shows social consensus plays the biggest role.

Moral Action
I act

Moral Intention
I think I will
What does my social group think?

Moral Judgment
I ask
•How likely is it that something bad will happen?
•How much will someone be harmed or benefited?
•What does my social group think?

•How close do I feel to those affected by my decision?
•What does my social group think?

I feel
Moral Awareness

Sometimes, people can recognize an ethical dilemma, decide "the right thing to do," resolve to act, and yet do not. The power of other people present is the most common explanation used for failing to act morally. In the last stage, a person carries out his or her decision, in spite of opposition or possible consequences, or chooses not to act.

THE MODEL APPLIED TO THE CASE STUDY

The model can be used to work through the decision point presented in the case study. The first step is to decide if this situation contains an ethical problem.

1. Ask yourself if any ethical issues are raised by the case study. This is an application of the moral awareness part of the model. Is anything wrong here? Is a person, community, or ideal at risk? Use the questions below as a way to guide your awareness of moral intensity factors.
• Who is affected by this situation and any decision I may make?
• How close do I feel to those affected by this situation?
• What do my peers think? Would they perceive an ethical problem here?
Below are some of the ethical issues the case study raises:
• The boy may die if not cared for by the corpsman.
• The boy cannot defend himself if you move on and call in follow-on aid.
• If the corpsman accompanies the boy, injured Marines may be at risk, because the corpsman will not be there to care for them in the field.

2. Using the moral judgment step in the model, formulate questions that will help you weigh various options. Here are some samples of moral judgment questions. Some questions help you to see how the moral intensity factors of magnitude of consequences, probability of effect, and social consensus might affect your decision making:
• Is it fair or unfair to leave the boy for follow-on aid? To evacuate him immediately?

• Is it just or unjust to leave the boy? To evacuate him now?
• Is it morally right or wrong to leave the boy for follow-on aid? To evacuate him now?
• Would leaving the boy and relaying his location to follow-on rescuers be acceptable to my family and friends, mentors, or other people I respect? Would it be acceptable to the boy's family, if they are alive? What about evacuating him now? How would these people respond to that action?
• Is leaving the boy, radioing his location and moving on in line with the standards, culture, and traditions of the Marine Corps? How about evacuating him now?
• Does leaving the boy for follow-on rescue violate a promise or code that is important to the Marine Corps? How about evacuating him now?
• What is the extent of harm or benefit that could occur if the boy is left for follow-on rescue as we move on?
• What is the extent of harm or benefit that could occur if the boy is evacuated now?
• How does the magnitude of possible consequences influence my moral judgment?
• How likely are the various harms and benefits from the various options in this situation? How do the probabilities affect my moral judgment?
• What would my peers think about the potential consequences? How would their opinions affect my moral judgment?

3. Using the moral intention step in the model, decide what you will do in this situation. Here are some sample moral intention questions:
• What do I think I should do?
• Do I really intend to act on my decision?
• Do I intend to follow standard procedure or depart from it?
Here are some examples of questions that highlight how the moral

intensity/social consensus factor might influence your decision making:
• How would my men likely act if in my place?
• How do they expect me to act?
• How does my perception of my Marines' intentions, expectations, or wishes influence my intention?

4. Using the moral action step in the model, ask yourself whether you will follow through with your decision. Here are some sample moral action questions:
• Would I really follow through on my intention?
• What might prevent me from acting on my intention?
• What might aid me in following through on my intention?
Here are further examples of how the moral intensity factor of social consensus might affect your moral action:
• Would other company commanders act on their decisions if in a similar situation?
• How do their potential actions influence my behavior?

Learning to apply the ethical decision making model to case studies like "The Corpsman" assists you in developing the moral "muscle memory" that will be required in high stress situations. Difficult ethical decision making becomes easier when it is built on the foundation of ongoing practice. Walking the steps from moral awareness to moral action is an indispensible skill of an ethical leader. ⚓

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