

Defining Moments

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Introduction

Managers often find themselves in situations where they have to choose between rights rather than rights and wrongs. They want to live up to their personal standards and values. At the same time, they have to meet the expectations of various stakeholders. They want to juggle across various responsibilities and aspirations. But it is difficult to satisfy all of them. Badaracco refers to right vs right choices as defining moments. These decisions, reveal a manager's/organization's basic values, test the strength of the manager's/ organization's commitments and shape the character of the person/organization. Unfortunately, there is no quick solution to such problems.

As Badaracco mentions, "... right versus right problems typically involve choices between two or more courses of action, each of which is a complicated bundle of ethical responsibilities, personal commitments, moral hazards, and practical pressures and constraints."

Understanding Defining Moments

All managers do not face the same kind of defining moment. The nature of the problem changes with seniority and responsibilities. Conflicts of personal integrity and moral identity usually appear in the early years of a manager's career.

As managers go up the corporate ladder, the situation changes. Their decisions begin to affect the livelihoods, career opportunities, and personal lives of other people. Along with power comes serious responsibilities. When these responsibilities conflict with each other and with personal values, we again have defining moments.

At even more senior levels, right vs right problems involve responsibilities that a company shares with other groups in society. A company's business partners and stakeholders have various legitimate claims but no company can satisfy all of them. Obligations to some group collide with those to others. Such problems are compared by the author with a game of three-dimensional chess. The game is played on three chess boards stacked one above the other! Handling one board itself is challenging. Imagine handling three boards simultaneously.

General ethical principles provide little comfort while resolving right vs right dilemmas. The decisive factors here are practical and personal. As the author puts it, "One must be

immersed in a situation and one must know who one is, in order to determine the right thing to do.”

Take Mission statements. Companies prepare mission statements for the purpose of public relations or for inspiring employees. They are the equivalent of a national anthem before a sporting event. But for most employees, the company credo is only a wall decoration for executive offices.

Can bedrock principles framed by the great philosophers help? For example John Stuart Mill mentioned that we must do whatever brings about the greatest good for the largest number of people. Kant on the other hand mentioned that we must do our moral duty. Mill clearly focused on the consequences while Kant did so on the rights and duties. In many right-vs-right dilemmas, the morality of consequences clashes with the morality of rights and duties. The two schools can give contradictory answers to ethical dilemmas and in that sense cannot be considered universally applicable.

Another way to resolve an ethical dilemma is to apply the sleep test. A person who has made the right choice can sleep soundly afterward. Someone who has made the wrong choice cannot. Sleep test ethics tells us that we must rely on our instincts when we face a difficult ethical problem. But the fact is there are many criminals and sinners who sleep soundly. At the same time, some people cannot sleep at night precisely because they have done the right things. They understand that acting honorably and decently can in some situations damage someone’s career prospects or life. It is also difficult to apply the sleep test because intuition does not often provide the solution. Moreover, managers cannot simply justify their solution to complex problems by saying. “This is my decision. My heart tells me it is right, and I know I can live with it, so there it is.” Managers have to offer convincing and compelling explanations to get buy in from employees into their decisions.

At the same time, intuition cannot be done away with completely. Human beings do depend on their intuition in defining moments. They are creatures of flesh and blood, spirit and emotion. They are not cold blooded or lifeless machines. That means they must use our gut feelings and intuition to their advantage. So the crucial issue is really not whether they must fall back on our intuition but how to use their intuition thoughtfully and responsibly, taking care to minimise our natural biases.

Aristotle had realized the importance of refining our intuition. He believed that emotions are frequently more reliable in deliberation than detached intellectual judgements. Aristotle also felt that ethical behaviour should be immediate, spontaneous and governed by intuition and not be the outcome of careful and laborious calculations and reflections. The preconditions for depending on intuition are character, maturity and thoughtfulness.

To deal with defining moments effectively, it makes sense to get a bit deeper into such situations. The core elements of a defining moment are revealing, testing and shaping. Defining moments give us a clear, sharp view of something which was earlier obscure. These situations reveal something important about a person's basic values, and abiding commitments in life. Defining moments also test a person's values. They tell us whether the person is only paying lip service or is really committed to particular values. Defining moments also shape people's character. At stake, during defining moments, are not only a manager's personal commitments and values, but the character and morale of an organization as well. Defining moments compel managers to reveal and test the ethics of their organization. Managers understand the difference between what the company aspires and what it actually does.

Self awareness plays a critical role in defining moments. The writer Friedrich Nietzsche once mentioned. "Become who you are." Four questions can come in handy here.

- How do my feelings and intuitions define for me, the conflict?
- How deep are the moral roots of the conflicting values that are creating the conflict? This involves an effort to understand which values and commitments, really have, defined a person's identity.
- "What is your way?" People must look at critical choices not only as shaped by the past but also as having an impact on the future. For example, the decisions involved in defining moments, may have an impact on the job and career.
- "What will work in the world as it is?" or to be more precise, "What combination of expediency and shrewdness, coupled with imagination and boldness, will move us closer to our personal goals?"

People not only must decide but also be able to sell their decision in defining moments. How can people get a buy in into their ideas during defining moments? Ideas that work have three characteristics.

- They have "value."
- They can be imposed on an idea already held to be true, without resulting in much disturbance. True ideas are down to earth, not esoteric.
- Underlying a successful idea is a process that has already been set in motion. A defining moment is far more than a climatic moment or courageous decision. The final, dramatic moment is often only the final and most visible part of a complex, political, psychological and administrative process. A defining moment involves a profound question: "Have I orchestrated a process that can make the value I care about become the truth for the organization?"

Virtu and Virtue

Hundreds of years back, Machiavelli had explained how to become politically savvy. Defining moments cannot be tackled without some degree of political savviness. Machiavelli used the word, Virtu (not virtue) to describe the moral code of public life. Virtu is a combination of vigor, confidence, imagination, shrewdness, boldness, practical skill, personal force, determination and self discipline. Managers must strike the right balance between virtu and virtue. In this context, they must ask three questions.

- Have I done all I can to secure my position and the strength and stability of my organization?
- Have I thought creatively and imaginatively about my organization's role in society and its relationship to its stakeholders?
- Should I play the lion or fox? Lions can make fearless, decisive strokes. On the other hand, foxes are masters of nuance, maneuver and subtlety. Foxes can wait patiently, watch astutely and then dart at the opportunity.

Badaracco has drawn on the work of various philosophers to come up with various practical guidelines for managers. Machiavelli defined success as having a strong and prosperous organization. He came up with several guidelines to ensure that in their zeal for upholding their ethical commitments, managers did not become martyrs.

Machiavelli cautioned people to watch out for adversaries. Their ethics must not be overestimated and their power must not be underestimated. Managers cannot simply define their company's role in society. They must negotiate it. They must be fluid and seize the opportunity, sometimes, playing the lion and sometimes the fox.

Even the great Aristotle seemed to hint at balancing virtu and virtue. He advocated the principle of the golden mean, "The man who shuns and fears everything and stands up to nothing becomes a coward, the man who is afraid of nothing at all, but marches up to every danger, becomes foolhardy."

Essentially, Aristotle asked: Have we done all we can to strike a balance, both morally and practically? Balance is a standard for assessing the ends or aims a manager pursues. Only ethical ends can vindicate unethical means. Balance is also a standard for evaluating tactics. The third aspect of balance is looking beyond the present moment and over time. A balanced plan of action must be robust across a range of possible scenarios and altered circumstances. Balance also means being modest and aware of one's limitations. Trying to take too many firm decisions involving too many stakeholders may sometimes backfire.

Conclusion

During defining moments, managers must do one right thing and leave another undone. And in some situations, managers may have to do a wrong thing to meet an important ethical obligation. Virtue and virtue remain in permanent tension. One is a web of responsibilities, commitments and ethical aspirations. The other world is an area of intense sometimes brutal competition. Often the tensions between the two worlds lie dormant. Managers are not affected too much. But when the tension erupts, it can exact an awful toll on the leader or manager involved. Ultimately, dealing with defining moments calls for a combination of creativity, persistence, courage, restraint, shrewdness and fairness.

To deal with defining moments, we have to make efforts to understand ourselves and prepare for the challenges ahead in life. From Marcus Aurelius, the great Roman emperor and philosopher who ruled between AD161 and AD180, Badaracco draws three important lessons.

We must create space for reflection by withdrawing from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day work. As Aurelius wrote: "Are you distracted by outward cares? Then allow yourself a space of quiet, wherein you can add to your knowledge of the Good and learn to curb your restlessness."

We must learn from the experiences of others, including role models. We must prepare systematically for defining moments, not only by drawing on the philosophy of great intellectuals like Aristotle or Nietzsche but also in the form of rich detailed stories of how actual managers resolved their ethical dilemmas and the consequences.

Temporary compromises may be unavoidable in life. But in the long run, we can be happy only if we are good human beings with a clear sense of direction. While Marcus Aurelius realized the importance of getting prepared for the immediate and pressing routines of daily life, he also knew how to take a long term perspective. Tactical, pragmatic, action oriented and politically astute approaches may cause managers to lose sight of the fact that they must lead a good, virtuous life. Marcus created for himself an integrated picture of how to be a friend, show affection to children, deal with flatterers, show courtesy, practice self control, worship Good and serve the community. In short, taking a lesson from Marcus, we must create an ideal that helps us to stay on the right course in the long run.

Dealing with defining moments is not easy. But there is much we can do to get ready for these challenges. Intense preparation and self reflection can hone our intuition. Knowledge and experience backed by intuition are ultimately what can help managers navigate these stormy situations.