

Moral Reasoning as a Strategic Leader Competency

Martin L. Cook

Professor of Ethics, US Army War College

The transition from organizational leadership to truly strategic leadership involves the development and enhancement of new skills and abilities. The relative clarity of missions, goals, and strategies required for effective leadership at the direct and organizational levels require one set of skills. There, the tasks are well-defined, as are the standards of performance. The leader is required to master and display those skills within that well-defined framework.

In contrast, the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) character of the issues and the environment at the strategic level evoke and demand new competencies and skills for successful leadership at that level. One can no longer assume what the central problem really is, let alone how it should best be handled. The strategic leader lives and works in a much more complex social and political environment than the direct or organizational leader. At those lower levels, the leader's place in a single hierarchy is usually quite clear; at the strategic level, one works with peers, and leads as much by building consensus as by issuing commands. Clearly, skills that may have made for excellent leadership at those lower levels may no longer serve as one advances to strategic leadership.

Among those new skills required at the strategic level is advanced ability in moral reasoning. Just as new demands are placed on the strategic leader in the areas of interpersonal skills, critical thinking, intellectual creativity and flexibility (to name only a few), the strategic environment also places new and different requirements on the moral reasoning skills of the strategic leader.

In ways analogous to those other areas, moral reasoning operates at various levels and moral issues arise at new levels of complexity. Modes of dealing with ethical issues which have served an individual well at some levels of leadership will become inadequate as that individual begins to function in more complex and unstructured environments. For the direct leader of troops, it may be adequate if one maintains one's integrity and tells the truth. And, more importantly, it may be perfectly clear in most or all circumstances which courses of action are morally right in the more defined areas of direct and even organizational leadership.

In the more complex and multifaceted environment of strategic leadership, in contrast, moral decision making is far more complex. The constraints, demands and expectations of strategic leaders bring multi-dimensional pressures to bear that require abilities in moral reasoning far more demanding than those required in less complex environments. In such environments, the moral challenges take on a fundamentally different character than in simpler operational assignments. Where, for example, is the line between the flexibility and pragmatism required for good strategic leadership and unacceptable moral compromise of fundamental principles? How do we distinguish between the morally justified and required incomplete disclosure of information to superiors, subordinates and political leadership and simple lying and deceit?

Clearly, the moral issues characteristic of this level of strategic leadership require a sophistication and nuance in moral thinking that simple slogans like "maintain your integrity" and "always tell the truth" do little to advance. Just as the transition to

strategic leadership requires growth in other dimensions of personal skills, so too in the moral arena, new skills and abilities are required in the dimension of moral reflection and analysis.

Moral development is often thought to be an inherently diffuse subject, not susceptible to objective discussion and analysis. Throughout this century, however, any number of dimensions of human development have been subjected to careful empirical study and analysis. Jean Piaget, for example, was able through close study of children to develop an account of normal human development of cognitive skills. James Fowler has studied the development of religious thinking in a similar way and developed a pattern of normal faith development.

Similarly, Lawrence Kohlberg and his successors have analyzed the patterns of normal human development in the area of morality and ethical thinking. They have developed the “Kohlberg Scale” of moral development and social scientific instruments such as the Defining Issues Test that allow empirical assessment of an individual’s level of moral thinking. This scale allows empirical determination of the level of an individual’s degree to moral thinking on a six-point scale, based on the reasoning pattern they exhibit as they think their way through set moral problems. For future strategic leaders, it is important to recognize these various levels of moral development and to assess where in this scale their own moral thinking may fall. In the following discussion, I will describe the outline of Kohlberg’s scale as a vehicle for our seminar discussion of moral thinking as a strategic leader competency.

Kohlberg divides moral development into three levels, each of which has two stages, generating a total of six stages. Each is distinguished by the central theme or idea the individual uses to make a determination of moral “rightness” or “wrongness.” The scale is developmental in the sense that human beings tend as they mature to advance up the scale (most adults cease development somewhere in Level Two, just as most adults cease development short of the highest levels of cognitive or other developmental scales). The outline of the model is as follows:

- Level One: Preconventional
 - Stage One: Reward and Punishment
 - Stage Two: Instrumental
- Level Two: Conventional
 - Stage Three: Peer group
 - Stage Four: Societal Expectation
- Level Three: Post-Conventional
 - Stage Five: Social Contract
 - Stage Six: Universal Moral Principle

The pivot of the scale is “conventional” moral thinking. This kind of moral thinking is central, not only in the sense that it lies in the middle of the scale, but also in the sense that most adults function at this level and approach moral issues in terms of this kind of thinking. By “conventional,” Kohlberg means moral thinking that conforms to the norms and styles of thinking typical of the individual’s environment and peer group. In other words, confronted with a moral issue or question, the conventional moral thinker resolves it by appealing to the taken-for-granted moral assumptions and beliefs of his

peer group (stage three), or the generalized moral assumptions of the society in which she lives (stage four). For example, consider the question whether a given social practice or arrangement is morally acceptable or not. The conventional thinker will approach the question with the assumption that those practices which are accepted in his or her society are valid, simply because the conventions of the social group approve of them. In other words, the conventional thinker will lack the ability to “think outside of” the moral assumptions of the group or society around her.

It is helpful to think about this level in terms of one’s own memories of growing up, and one’s observations of children. Toddlers and preschoolers are very clear in their orientation toward reward and punishment and their concern with authority figures. Teenagers are notorious for their orientation toward approval of their peers and their tendency to “follow the crowd,” even in behavior they have been taught is wrong and foolish. And many adults clearly behave and think in highly conventional terms of their society, finding it hard or impossible to “stand out” and question or challenge the moral assumptions of their society.

But to return to the discussion of the scale itself: children, and some poorly socialized adults, do not think about moral issues even in terms of convention. For such “pre-conventional” moral thinkers, moral choices are governed solely with reference to themselves and their personal welfare. At the lowest level, stage one, those things are “wrong” which will be punished by authority figures in that person’s life. For example, for a toddler, the concern with being chastised or punished by a parent is the determining factor in judging their behavior. Similarly, “right” is what parents or other authorities approve, and behavior that conforms to the direction of those authorities is judged to be good behavior.

A slightly higher but still pre-conventional mode of moral reasoning occurs at stage two. At this level, the individual assesses actions by asking whether a course of action will or will not advance individual interests. In other words, actions are assessed “instrumentally” -- in terms of whether they bring about outcomes the individual desires. Think of the ways parents persuade children to “be good” by promising that if they are, they’ll receive a special reward or opportunity to do something they really want.

The lowest level of conventional thinking emerges as a child matures and recognition dawns that there are moral rules to be followed and principles to be respected, even at the cost to personal preference and desires. For the stage three thinker, those moral principles are those approved by one’s peer group, friends and communities. Perhaps the clearest example of this level of thinking is the typical middle-schooler, for whom standing apart from the peer group is virtually inconceivable. But the demands of the group may or may not always give the individual what he or she really wants. The expectations of the group have come to take on a life and authority of their own, and may override the individual’s personal wants and needs.

As the individual matures, conventional thinking advances to stage four, where the measure of right and wrong is no longer the immediate peer group, but the broader standard of “society.” At this stage, the measure of right and wrong is the expectation and attitude of the ambient society of the individual. The conventions are no longer those of the small immediate social group, but of the shared assumptions and values of the ambient culture. Research has shown that most adults think about moral questions in this pattern. They accept the values and expectations of the society they live in without

question. When asked to think about a moral question, they resolve it by appealing to those beliefs and attitudes as the final norm of judging. The idea that the widely shared moral beliefs of their society might themselves be questioned or even rejected is not conceivable or is entertained only fleetingly. Conventional moral thinkers do not evidence an ability or inclination to think beyond the moral world of those shared social assumptions.

The “post-conventional” stages of moral development contrast with the conventional modes in their willingness and ability to think about moral issues outside the framework of society’s values and assumptions. Only a small minority of the population demonstrates the ability to reason about moral questions in these ways. But even though only a minority manifest moral thinking at these levels, development of this level of moral thinking is still a normal progression in human development, just as we can identify “higher” levels of cognitive development as normal even though most adults do not attain them. The top of all such developmental scales represents the highest levels of development of adult capacities, even while recognizing that average development falls short of that highest level.

For individuals who progress beyond conventional moral thinking, stage five represent the first post-conventional level. The Stage Five individual thinks about ethics in terms of the social contract and the generalized requirements of social cooperation in a society. Stage five reasoning recognizes that social order and organization require individuals to give up some of their liberties and to compromise some wants, both of themselves as individuals, and also of social groups as well.

For example, at the international level, the stage five thinker recognizes that national self-interest itself must be limited and compromised because the smooth functioning of the international order can occur only when all states accept a shared set of limitations on their discretion to act in terms of pure self-interest.

This kind of thinking accepts the necessity of thinking beyond the range of the society or group of which he or she is a member. It recognizes that the social group is itself set in a larger web of groups and relationships. Stage Five thinking sees that the good order and functioning of that larger web is a value to be preserved, even at some cost to individual and group preference.

But like the earlier levels, it still understands the standard of moral judgement in terms of its *functionality*, in terms of its maximizing and maintaining an essentially *non-moral* value -- in this case, the social contract itself. So while Stage Five involves thinking beyond the conventional level, it also subordinates moral issues to non-moral ones. It thinks about morality in terms of bringing about non-moral ends that are desirable rather than viewing moral questions in terms of the importance of morality for its own sake.

Very few individuals attain the highest level of moral reasoning, Stage Six. Kohlberg uses as examples Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Stage Six thinkers assess ethical issues in terms of universal ethical principles. At this stage, moral thinking is able to transcend the interests of individuals, societies, and even of the social contract. For stage six thinkers, concepts of ethical thought such as justice and fairness have a universally applicable meaning that enables them think outside the accepted values of the society in which they find themselves and even of the functional requirements of maintenance of social order. Rather than accepting the taken-for-granted moral

assumptions of their society as givens, Stage Six thinkers defend and advocate principles of ethics even at great personal cost, and even in the face of seemingly overwhelming evidence that their values are “unrealistic” or idealistic.

The Kohlberg Scale is, of course, not the only way to think about moral development. Critics have questioned its reliance on *moral reasoning* as the measure of moral development and have pointed out one can hardly assume that moral reasoning correlates well with moral behavior.

Furthermore, it is not obvious that Stage Six thinking would be functional for a society or group in large numbers. Smooth functioning of a society or organization (perhaps especially military organizations?) depends on most people meeting social expectations most of the time.

Of course the same *behavior* can result from different motives and understandings of the moral life. Contrast, for example, two individuals in a military organization who equally follow orders and serve their organization effectively. One, the conventional thinker, may do so because he or she simply cannot think of doing otherwise. The other, in contrast, manifests the same behavior, but does so because she understands *why* such behavior is required of military personnel, *why* military organizations are important and valuable in the service of the country, and *why* service to the country is itself valuable.

In this example, both individuals are of equal value to the military in the day-to-day issues of being a good soldier or officer. One would hope and expect, however, that the more advanced moral thinker would have facility in moral thinking that would serve him well in unfamiliar circumstances, when confronting novel and challenging moral issues, or when moral leadership is required.

The same point can be made more strongly regarding strategic leadership and moral development. Progress through the officer ranks to the strategic level has generally required that the individual demonstrate success in negotiating through a system of hierarchy and obedience. There are rare individuals who succeed in the military in the junior officer ranks by being unconventional, but they are indeed rare. In terms of their moral thinking too, one would expect that most successful officers (like most adults generally) are Stage Two conventional moral thinkers of some sort.

Success at the behavioral level may flow from different kinds of moral thinking. The person of more advanced moral thinking will be most useful when confronted with the novel and the unanticipated. Since the strategic environment has exactly those features, post-conventional moral thinking abilities are indeed a required strategic leader competency.

Strategic leaders, almost by definition, deal *only* in the realm of the unanticipated, the uncertain, the ambiguous. The world of strategic leadership is fundamentally one where conventional wisdom is inadequate. Success at the strategic leadership level continually requires capabilities to see and frame novel ways of approaching problems and of seeing beyond or beneath the ways things are conventionally done.

At the strategic level, therefore, just as one requires skills in critical thinking or interpersonal negotiation one might have succeeded without at lower levels of leadership, one needs to develop post-conventional approaches to moral thinking as well. The VUCA world of strategic leadership requires “thinking outside the box” on all dimensions of one’s skills, and moral thinking is no exception. But it is equally

important to note that advanced moral thinking, not coupled with practical wisdom and experience, can be as dangerous as it is helpful.

For our purposes in seminar discussion for this lesson, we will use the Kohlberg scale to *understand* the concept of moral thinking as developmental and graduated. It will provide us with a context to discuss how post-conventional moral development might be developed and how it serves as an important component of the skill-set required of successful strategic leaders. It is important to understand that moral thinking operates as a range of levels. I conclude by citing the observation of a friend who teaches ethics at another senior service school. In a conversation with faculty from one of the service academies, the academy faculty asked how he handled moral relativism, the idea that ethics is entirely a matter of personal opinion. This kind of relativism is, in fact, a commonplace among 18-22 year-olds, whether at service academies or civilian colleges. My friend's reply was telling I think. He said, "I don't have that problem. How many O-5's do you know who are moral relativists? My problem is excessive moral certainty." Was he right?