

Moral Development and Leadership? What a concept!

We all make decisions constantly. We decide what to wear, what to eat, whether to answer the phone, which route to take to work, and so on. We're used to making decisions. But the really tough decisions are those where there's right and wrong on both sides, or where our decisions may cause pain to another individual or to ourselves. It's important, first, to understand just how we make decisions, and second, to have a method of evaluating things so we can make the tough choices with a clearer mind and easier heart.

So, how are we conditioned to make decisions? Jean Piaget, a Swiss child psychologist, studied the ways children make decisions, and constructed a theory of what he called the "stages of moral development." Later another psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg elaborated on Piaget's theory and applied it to adult decision making as well. This work states that, as we go through life, our decisions are based upon different factors, arranged in a logical progression.

The first stage is through the threat of punishment. That's how a lot of us were raised growing up: "If you don't clean your room, you can't go to the party." Punishment deals with fear and external motivation—not a very high place from which to make a decision, and certainly not a way to run a business or corporation.

The second stage is with reward. "If you clean your room, I'll buy you that jacket you want." This is how we turn our kids into capitalists. Reward is great motivation, but unless you want to be held hostage by constant demands, it's not effective. If your kids or any of your employees ask you, or imply this attitude of: "If I do that what will you give me?" you know they're motivated only by reward.

The third stage is the concept of good and bad. You're a good employee if you do this, a bad employee if you do that. However, the terms "good" and "bad" are relative; they mean the person doing the speaking is making a value judgment. If I call my employee "good," what I'm really saying is, "You did what I wanted you to do." But does that necessarily mean that the employee sees it in the exact same way? No. He or she could be saying inside, "Boy, that was a stupid way to get that done," or "Gee, that wasn't the kind of service I wanted."

The fourth stage is rules and regulations. Did you ever hear your parents say, "As long as you live in this house, you'll do the dishes" or "take out the garbage" or some other list of chores? Every business also has rules and regulations for its employees' behavior. We all have to live with rules and regulations. However, what's directing our choices in all of these cases—punishment, reward, good and bad, rules and regulations? It is all based on external forces. We're deciding based upon what other people are telling us, not what we're telling ourselves.

The fifth stage is choice and commitment. As you grew up, you began to make more and more choices for yourself, right? You chose the courses you took in school, whether to go to college, what you majored in, where to live, who to date. You chose and then committed to that choice. Whether it's the kind of peanut butter you buy or the job you take, choice and commitment form the basis of most adult decisions.

The sixth stage is internalization. You become what your choices are. You are a doctor, or a cop, or a secretary. You're married or single. And the great thing is, you can continue to evolve based upon your choices every minute. None of us are truly stuck in what we are because we're constantly evolving, constantly becoming something different and hopefully better. Becoming is the essence of living—you only stop becoming when they put dirt on your face. We need to be operating from the highest possible level of decision making, where we have internalized the ethics and values that are important to us and we allow ourselves to evolve as human beings, managers, workers, parents, spouses, and children.

These stages of development are extremely useful when we examine our decisions from an ethical perspective. The first step is to identify your own level of decision making. It's an important question, because you cannot lead people beyond where you are. The goal is for you and your associates to make decisions based upon choice and commitment and internalization. You want to choose and commit to the values of your company, and internalize those values so completely that there is no question about the appropriate response in any situation.

How can you tell where people are on this scale? If someone is working on levels one through four, they will use the phrase, "What do I have to do?" If they're operating on levels five and six, they will be using the phrase, "What can I do?" Your people will tell you where they are. It's your job as the leader to empower them to move to a different stage, to a different level of relating and motivation, but only if you are on the level you want your people to function on.

Therefore the onus is on the leader to be able to discern not only where your people are on these "stages" but more importantly the "stage" you're on, as a leader, because you cannot lead beyond the stage you're on.

