



Moral Courage

Different Types of Courage

Many of us express an admiration for those who exhibit moral courage by standing up for what they think is right. We may even post quotes like the one attributed to Nelson Mandela: "Stand up for what you believe in, even if it means standing alone."

At the same time, our experience is that most people we work with in organizations have an aversion to taking risks. They "go along to get along" and leave unchallenged the prevailing practices and the current "wisdom" found in the workplace. They avoid disturbing the ethical peace of their peers and supervisors.

- Moral courage appears to be more admired than exhibited.

Discussions of nursing ethics, where "moral distress" was first given extensive attention, now also include a focus on "moral courage." Here is an example:

"Nurses practicing in today's healthcare environment face increasingly complex ethical dilemmas. We encounter these dilemmas in situations where our ability to do the right thing is frequently hindered by conflicting values and beliefs of other healthcare providers.

Some confront the ethical issues directly while others turn away. Upholding our commitment to patients requires significant moral courage. Moral courage helps us address ethical issues and take action when doing the right thing is not easy. Moral courage involves the willingness to speak out and do what is right in the face of forces that would lead us to act in some other way.

Nurses who possess moral courage and advocate in the best interest of the patient may at times find themselves experiencing adverse outcomes. There is a need for all nurses in all roles across all settings to commit to working toward creating work environments that support moral courage."

<http://nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/EthicsStandards/Courage-and-Distress>

As with "moral distress," the concept of "moral courage" can be used to consider the nature of the ethical realities and challenges that can face everyone in the organization, not just nurses.

Note: Though there are important ways in which the need for moral courage applies to the organization as a whole as well as to individuals, only individuals are considered in this discussion.

Morally Courageous Actions

In ethics education, the point is often made that a commitment to good ethics has two implications: (1) good ethics means avoiding unethical behavior and contributing to an environment that diminishes the likelihood that others will engage in unethical behavior; (2) good ethics means contributing to the effort to find the best answers and the best practices in regard to ethically difficult issues, where it is not (yet) clear what is the right or best thing to do.

- Good ethics in the organization means both the avoidance of wrongdoing and the sensitivity / attention to the ethical implications of decisions and policies.
- One of the major purposes for having Clinical Ethics Committees, for example, is to improve decision making (regarding policies and cases) where it is not always immediately evident what is the best action to take.

In the *Nursing World* quotation above, acting with moral courage is described as addressing ethical issues and speaking out / taking action when it is not easy to do so. Perhaps it would be helpful to consider two different forms in which moral courage is exhibited by individuals in health care organizations, based on and related to the two implications of a commitment to good ethics.

Type One

Type 1 Moral Courage is demonstrated by calling attention to a practice that is occurring in the workplace that is contrary to policy, regulations, or clearly established ethical or professional standards – and which is being ignored or tolerated. Something wrong is being done and no corrective actions are being taken. Even

when there is no doubt that important expectations are not being met, it is often personally difficult to speak out. It involves of risk of adverse consequences to challenge the acceptance by or the (willful) ignorance of others. It requires moral courage.

- Examples might include violations of patient rights, of conflict-of-interest policy, of policy on disruptive behavior or harassment, of research ethics, of fraud and abuse standards, etc.
- No matter how clear the “wrong,” fear often prevents speaking out – “...fear of being ignored, fear of alienating others and being labeled disloyal, fear of isolation and marginalization, fear of loss of reputation, fear of retribution, fear of job loss....”

(Francoise Baylis, “Of Courage, Honor, and Integrity, in Lisa Eckenwiler and Felicia Cohn, *The Ethics Of Bioethics*, 2007, p. 194)

- Even when organizations have policies protecting against retaliation for individuals who report wrongdoing, some of these fears are not unfounded. Many who speak out while their colleagues keep quiet do suffer negative consequences of one sort or another. To speak out takes courage.
- Courage is especially required in cases in which the person tolerating the practice is higher in the organizational chart or has greater institutional power or authority than the one calling attention to the practice.

Type Two

Type 2 Moral Courage that does not receive as much attention but is also of great importance for organizations striving for ethical excellence. Many of us have seen situations in which individuals who have given much consideration to what should be done about a particular issue are reluctant to voice their opinions.

When there is an indication of the direction in which the organizational leaders – or those who are the “opinion leaders” – are moving, it takes moral courage to raise questions about a proposal or to express a dissenting position.

- The moral imperative to speak out in these cases is not the need to stop something that has already been clearly established as inappropriate but to try to influence decisions that appear to be based on incomplete or poor ethical analysis or rationale.
- The not-easy-to-speak-out reality can occur in all sorts of contexts, from senior management meetings to departments and committees throughout the organization, even in settings, like Ethics Committees, that are designed for careful discussions of ethical issues.
- Examples include many different policies and practices (some discussed in past issues of *Ethics Matters*) related to Human Resources, marketing, clinical care, research, etc.
- It is often difficult even for those who have strong convictions related to an issue to speak up when doing so means going against the (apparent) positions of those in leadership positions or those who are key opinion leaders. There are not only the kinds of fears listed above -

fear of being ignored, fear of being identified as a “negative” voice – but also the risk of being ethically inarticulate or of coming across as morally arrogant, that is, as giving the impression that they think they have higher ethical standards than others.

Supporting Moral Courage

Moral courage is a personal virtue, but the support and promotion of moral courage is an organizational responsibility. As is the case with other virtues, individual moral courage gets exhibited more in organizations that have work environments that encourage and support it.

Given human realities, it is probably not possible to develop work environments that make it easy for individuals to speak out about violations that others ignore (Type 1) or to speak out to question the favored positions or proposals of certain others in the organization (Type 2).

- Some degree of moral courage will always be required in these circumstances, but, in the ethically best organizations, taking these actions is less difficult because efforts have been made to protect against negative consequences as much as possible.

As health care organizations work to improve the protection of those who speak out about non-compliance with policies and regulations, it is important to recognize that doing this is only one half of what needs to be done to support moral courage.

Other and different steps are necessary to promote Type 2 Moral Courage and to protect those who exhibit it.