

# The Use of Phronesis in Ethical Decision Making for Leaders

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## Abstract

This paper presents the culmination of a three year Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project. Decision making is a well-recognised dimension of leadership, however, to combine that dimension with ethics and the power to make a difference to society has to date been a mainly theoretical endeavour originally undertaken by Aristotle and more recently by Alasdair MacIntyre. Empirical research to date in this area has been challenged by limitations on methodology and on the number of research participants involved.

Phronesis (practical wisdom) is a concept that seems to be in demand from a number of sectors especially clinical leadership in the health sector. The aim being to bring good outcomes for patients and wider society. Recent concerns for GPs and medical consultants include taking care of their mental health, risks relating to medical negligence litigation, rationing of resource as part of deciding upon treatment and trying to make decisions between differing courses of treatment. Phronesis as a concept offers a practical and ethical approach to managing these professional quandaries and deciding on a way forward. Phronesis is generally accepted to be the executive virtue that helps decide on the way forward through many virtues (e.g. courageous, fair, resilient and lawful) that vie for attention and dominance. However, there is a gap in understanding what phronesis means to the medical community through their career stages and what medical education and training could do to cultivate phronesis at all stages. A new study has asked: What does making wise ethical decisions mean to the medical community? Further, based on the answer to that question: What moral debating resources are appropriate to support the cultivation of ethical decision making? The methodology used in the study has been developed specifically for the study of phronesis and combines a narrative and arts based approach. The study findings bring together virtues referred to in the participants' ethical decision making stories into a consolidated set of virtue continuums showing two poles and the mean. In addition a video series enacts a representative range of the stories and is told through the lives of a consultant and GP navigating the virtues continuums at play to arrive at decisions. We suggest here that this new methodological approach and these findings offer the potential to fill the gap in understanding what phronesis means to medical leaders presently and provide ethical debating to allow anyone with leadership responsibility to cultivate phronesis in their decision making.

Virtue ethics and an executive virtue concept named phronesis (practical wisdom) was applied as the theoretical lens to data we collected from 131 GPs and medical consultants. We interviewed probably the most trusted profession in the world to find out what making ethically wise decisions means to them. The narratives we collected offer a social construction of the composite ethical wisdom from a reasonable large group from the medical profession. In addition to the narratives we produced a film series to convey the findings showing the virtues in action when faced with challenging decisions. The paper contributes both a describable process and a deeper, more nuanced set of what we have called virtue continuums (VCs). We think that the findings are applicable to any context and leadership role and we offer a prototype process for leadership decision making based on the findings. The paper will argue that these virtues are the starting point for a new understanding of practically wise decision making for leaders with responsibility for making ethical decisions. Further that when they are combined with film series as an ethical debating resource and the staged process they can bring not only a reduction in the costs (human and financial) associated with fraudulent activity for any organisation but also bring well-being to more people in the organisation's local community and wider society.

On the leadership development front there is growing awareness that moral virtues (rather than values) are essential for leaders to make decisions that are socially just, environmentally sustainable and financially viable. How professional leadership education is supposed to promote virtue ethics including phronesis has therefore been another aspect of the study and this paper can offer practical implications to be considered. One argument is that virtues come more through the experience of real situations and reflection rather than by listening in lecture halls. We argue here that thoughtful approaches to virtue ethics and phronesis education can assist learners in their moral self-understanding and help them calibrate their ethical commitments within a community of professionals committed to a

shared set of core ethical virtues. It is a process that should encourage collaborative identification and promotion of a vision of what is good for their customers and society. This process depends on facilitated ethical debate with the availability of moral debating resources and space for individual and shared reflection. In pilot studies we have used the film series to allow tutors and learners better appreciate the words, actions, and structures that create the moral environments in which virtues are communicated, tested, integrated, and cultivated. We have also shown that the resources from the study also offer the space for leaders to include other virtues that they feel are relevant to their specific contexts and ethical dilemmas.