

Moral Injury and Ethical Leadership.

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Abstract

Popular accounts of leadership often discuss it as something acquired through overcoming significant challenges or obstacles. Studies variously discuss leadership as something learned through ‘crucible’ or painful learning experiences, or engagement with uncertainty and failure. Mainstream accounts of the painful learning experiences of leaders are often framed as heroic narratives where the individual conquers misfortune by channelling inner reserves of strength, resolve or resilience.

This paper discusses the concept of the ‘Moral Injury’ (hereafter MI) in relation to the emergence of a form of ethical leadership where leaders traverse their own values or ethical frameworks subsequently undergo personal change that produces social goods for their organisations and external stakeholders. The concept of the MI originated in the work of the psychiatrist Johnathan Shay (1994, 2002, 2014) who treated armed service personnel traumatised by experiences where either they, or their leaders, violated their values. Until recently, MIs have been primarily studied in the context of military psychology. The concept of the MI draws heavily on the impact of leaders on follower, and as such, has the potential to open up new avenues of understanding of a leaders ‘power’ to enable significant personal, organizational and social change.

This paper will outline the concept of the MI and will discuss its relevance to leadership studies. Accounts of leaders who have either received or inflicted moral injuries, and the impact that these had on individuals and their leadership practice will be discussed. Shay (2014) based his original definition of Moral Injury on a combination of his patients’ narratives and the representation of Achille’s story in Homer’s Iliad as involving:

- ‘A betrayal of what’s right.
- By someone who hold legitimate authority (e.g., in the military – a leader).
- In a high-stakes situation.

All three’ (183).

Although the role of leaders is emphasised in Shay’s work, other scholars point out that MIs can arise when individuals violate their own ethical codes by participating in or failing to prevent acts that transgress their value systems (Litz et al. 2009; Allen 2014). MIs differ from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in both cause and impact. PTSD typically results from exposure to a traumatic experience and symptoms include aggression, hyper-arousal etc. MI results from ‘knowing’ that one has violated an important personal moral belief rather than ‘witnessing’ it and symptoms include a sense of a loss of meaningfulness and depression (Matthews 2014).

Many ‘heroic’ leadership accounts present the leader as overcoming an externally created unforeseen problem or issue. Accounts of admitting guilt for transgressing personal values are rare, but those that exist are worthy of analysis as they often demonstrate fundamental personal change and a renewed drive for more ethical ways of leading managing and organising. Although MIs are psychologically damaging for the wounded, they can be productive of pro-social action, and a key element of ‘repair’ for morally injury involves the Injured finding ways to ensure that others do not undergo the same experiences that resulted in their injury.

For example, Ray C. Anderson’s described reading Paul Hawken’s *The Ecology of Commerce*

(1993) in injurious terms that resulted in changing his attitude to the natural world that in turn transformed his company into a leading sustainability-oriented, pro-environmental organisation. Morally injured by the role his own company played in polluting the natural world, Anderson was compelled to repair both:

'I read it, and it changed my life. It hit me right between the eyes. It was an epiphany. I wasn't halfway through it before I had the vision I was looking for... and a powerful sense of urgency to do something to begin to correct the mistakes of the first industrial revolution. Hawken's message was a spear in my chest that is still there' (1998) 39-40.

This paper will unpack the concept of the morally injured leader as a potential contribution to the field of ethical leadership. It will be discussed in relation to other forms are predominant in the ethical leadership space such as: authentic leadership, transformational leadership, principle-centred leadership (Covey 1992); servant leadership; level-5 leadership (Collins 2001) and responsible leadership (Voegtlin 2016). Avenues for additional research and theorisation and their application for leadership development and/or teaching will be discussed. As introducing psychoanalytical approaches to leadership development initiatives can prove traumatic to participants and students particular attention will be given to the practicalities of introducing the concept into structured learning environments.

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