Moral Imagination Thinking

Idea In Short

Many ethical failures at work do not start with bad intent. They start with a narrow view of the situation, where routine habits screen out the people who might be hurt and the options that might help. Patricia Werhane called the remedy moral imagination, the ability to step outside the usual script, see the situation as a web of moral relationships, and picture better alternatives. The idea matters because rules and analysis can only choose among options already on the table. This article explains the concept, shows how mental models limit ethical vision, and offers practical ways for leaders to widen the field of options.

A product team plans to ship a savings feature that nudges users to round up purchases. Testing shows strong engagement, and the legal review is clean. A designer asks a question that nobody had raised: "What happens to a user who has no cushion and cannot afford the round-ups?" The team had followed a standard launch script that never prompted the question. The designer's question opened a better design.

The core idea

Patricia Werhane gave moral imagination its best-known definition in business ethics. A Business Ethics Quarterly commentary quotes her as describing it as an ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting in a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action. The same commentary notes her view that people and institutions sometimes act unethically because they have a narrow perspective and little moral imagination.1

Two parts of the definition stand out. The first is discernment of possibilities, which means widening the list of options. The second is envisioning help and harm, which means looking ahead at the people each option would touch.

Most ethics training focuses on choosing among options. Moral imagination comes earlier,

and it determines which options exist to be chosen.

A web of moral relationships

Werhane's later book describes the skill as the ability to perceive that a web of competing economic relationships is also a web of moral relationships. Developing it means becoming sensitive to ethical issues in business decisions and searching out places where people are likely to be hurt by the behavior of organizations or managers.

The same source argues that moral imagination, together with moral reasoning, is a necessary ingredient in management decision-making. Imagination finds the possibilities, and reasoning tests them.

For a manager, this means looking at a supply chain, a pricing plan, or a layoff list as a network of people with claims on you. A line in a spreadsheet may stand for a family, a small supplier, or a customer who relies on a product at a difficult moment.

How scripts limit vision

Organizations run on scripts, which are habitual ways of handling familiar situations. Scripts save time and reduce error, and they also screen out information. A cambridgeblog summary of Werhane's recent book explains her argument that ethical failures often arise from a failure to consider the multiple and ethically relevant features normally screened out by routine practices, and that moral imagination lets managers see alternatives beyond business as usual.2

Consider a collections team that follows a call script. The script says to ask for payment and offer a plan. A caller who mentions a family emergency does not fit the script, so the agent returns to the standard line. The script worked as intended and still produced a poor result.

The first move of moral imagination is to notice the script. Ask, "What are we assuming here, and who or what does that assumption leave out?"

Mental models and systems

Werhane connected moral imagination to systems thinking. A chapter from a collection of

her work reprints an article in which she addresses the role of moral imagination in systems thinking and makes the link explicit, in the context of globalization.3

The link makes sense. A mental model is a simplified picture of how part of the world works. A narrow model leaves out parts of the system, and the excluded parts are often where harm occurs.

Practical leaders can draw the system on a whiteboard. Place the decision in the middle, add every group it touches, and mark the flows of money, information, and risk between them. Blank areas on the map show where more inquiry is needed.

Ethical and successful together

A common fear is that ethics costs money. Moral imagination challenges that assumption by looking for alternatives that serve both aims. The University of Texas Ethics Unwrapped program describes it as our ability to think outside the box and envision ways to be both ethical and successful.4

Its teaching notes add that advertising practitioners who use moral imagination tend to work in agencies that encourage moral sensitivity, where ethical values are clearly articulated and broadly embraced.

The lesson for leaders is that imagination depends on climate. People will not propose a new option if they fear ridicule or blame. Say openly that ethical ideas are welcome, and reward the people who raise them.

Techniques for generating options

Begin with perspective shifts. Describe the decision from the viewpoint of each affected group, using their words and concerns. If you cannot do this, talk to someone who can.

Use the "what if" prompt. What if we had no budget limit? What if the affected person were a family member? What if a journalist were writing the story? Each prompt breaks a habit of thought.

Generate before judging. Collect at least five options, including odd ones, before testing

any. Then evaluate with moral reasoning, using tools such as outcomes, duties, and fairness. Many good solutions start as ideas that sounded strange.

Moral imagination and courage

New options often require someone to speak up. The Ethics Unwrapped materials note that it often takes courage to exercise moral imagination. A person who proposes a different path may face skepticism, extra work, or a conflict with a boss.

Leaders can lower the cost. Invite dissenting ideas in meetings, credit the person who raised them, and follow up on suggestions. When an idea fails, treat the attempt as useful learning, and avoid blame.

Individuals can prepare as well. Frame the proposal around shared goals, bring a small pilot test, and enlist an ally. A modest experiment is easier to approve than a sweeping change.

Building the habit in a team

Moral imagination grows through repeated practice. Add a standing question to project reviews: "Who is affected by this that we have not heard from?" The question takes thirty seconds and often surfaces a customer, a supplier, or a junior colleague whose view changes the plan.

Rotate the role of the outsider. In each meeting, one person argues for the group that is absent, whether a customer, a regulator, or a future employee. The role gives permission to raise uncomfortable points without appearing disloyal.

Capture the options that arise, including the ones rejected. A short log shows over time which ideas proved useful and which assumptions the team tends to repeat, and it gives new members a sense of how the group thinks about ethics in practice.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical logistics firm that plans to shorten delivery windows to beat a competitor. The script says to compress schedules and add penalties for late drivers. A dispatcher asks what the change does to drivers with long routes in bad weather.

The firm maps the system and finds that rushed drivers will skip rest breaks, raise accident risk, and increase turnover. It tries a different approach: dynamic windows that adjust to weather and traffic, with bonuses for safe, on-time delivery. Customer satisfaction rises, and accidents fall. The case is invented, but it shows how a question from outside the script can open a better option.

Cautions

Imagination without analysis can wander into wishful thinking. A creative option still needs facts, costs, and consequences examined with care. Pair imagination with disciplined reasoning.

Beware of imagining only comfortable possibilities. Include the ones that challenge your own interests, since a broader view sometimes means giving something up.

Finally, remember that people can use imagination for harm. A paper building on Werhane's theory discusses immoral imagination alongside other behavioral ethics concepts, and a clever way to evade a rule is indeed an act of imagination.5 Keep the moral purpose clear, and test each idea against the interests of those affected.

- 1Imagination, fantasy, wishful thinking, and truth
- 2Moral imagination in the 21st century: individuals and organizations
- 3Mental models, moral imagination and systems thinking in the age of globalization
- 4Moral imagination
- 5Moral imagination and behavioral ethics

Summary

Moral imagination thinking helps leaders see the ethical stakes of routine decisions and invent options that serve both goodness and success. Werhane's work shows that scripts, habits, and narrow mental models screen out relevant people and possibilities, and that imagination, paired with moral reasoning, can reopen them. Leaders can practice by stepping outside their own view, tracing who could be hurt, mapping the hidden script, and generating alternatives before judging them. Pair imagination with careful reasoning, since

each needs the other. Pick one routine decision this week, list who it affects that you rarely consider, and write two options that nobody has proposed yet.