Moral Reasoning

Idea In Short

Every leader eventually faces a choice where the rules run out. A supplier offers a favor, a product defect is small but real, or a layoff list includes a friend. In such moments people reason about what they owe others and what kind of person they want to be. Psychologists have studied that reasoning for decades, from Lawrence Kohlberg's stages to Jonathan Haidt's challenge to the idea that reason leads the way. This article explains what moral reasoning is, what research says about its strengths and limits, and how leaders can build habits that join logic and empathy and narrow the gap between judgment and action.

A regional sales director learns that a product line has a minor safety flaw. Fixing it will cost a quarter's bonus pool, and the regulator probably will not notice. Nobody has told her what to do. She spends the weekend arguing with herself, and by Monday she has produced three reasons to wait and three reasons to act. Her reasoning feels thorough, and she wonders whether it is honest.

What moral reasoning is

Moral reasoning is the process of working out what is right, fair, or owed in a given situation. It draws on principles such as honesty and fairness, on predictions about consequences, and on the felt experience of the people involved. Good reasoning combines these inputs and weighs them, and it can explain its conclusions to others.

Two things distinguish it from mere opinion. It gives reasons that others can inspect, and it stays open to revision when someone points out a missing fact or an overlooked person. Leaders who reason morally can say not only what they decided but why, and they can hear objections without defensiveness.

The topic has a long research history in psychology, philosophy, and business ethics, and the findings are more mixed than many managers expect.

Kohlberg's stages

Lawrence Kohlberg built the best-known account of how moral reasoning develops. An encyclopedia entry describes his theory as holding that moral reasoning, a necessary but not sufficient condition for ethical behavior, has six developmental stages, each more adequate at responding to moral dilemmas than its predecessor. The stages fall into pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional phases.1

The American Psychological Association summarizes the picture in plain terms. Kohlberg saw humans as born without an innate moral framework who develop one through six stages, from simply avoiding punishment, through internalizing social standards, to developing and acting on a personal set of moral principles that may or may not agree with the law.2

For leaders, the stages offer a useful question: what is the basis of my reasoning? "We might get caught" sits at the lower end. "Everyone in the industry does it" sits in the middle. "This treats people with the respect they are owed" sits at the higher end.

The judgment-action gap

Reasoning well does not ensure acting well. A review of Kohlberg's influence in business ethics notes that his model lacks a compelling explanation for the judgment-action gap, even though it continues to shape theory, research, teaching, and practice.3

Everyone has seen the gap. A manager can state with clarity why a practice is wrong and still go along with it, because the boss wants it, the team is tired, or the cost of speaking up looks high.

The lesson is that moral reasoning needs support. Leaders who want ethical conduct should work on the conditions that let people act on their reasoning: safe channels, backing from senior people, and clear consequences for retaliation.

The challenge from intuition

Jonathan Haidt challenged the view that reasoning drives moral judgment. In his paper on the social intuitionist approach, he wrote that research on moral judgment had been

dominated by rationalist models and proposed an alternative in which moral reasoning is usually a process after the fact, used to influence the intuitions, and hence the judgments, of other people.4

If Haidt is right, then the weekend spent producing six reasons may reveal less about the decision than about a pre-existing leaning. The director may have decided early and then built a case.

This view does not make reasoning worthless. It suggests that reasoning is most useful when used to test intuitions, to look for views that conflict with ours, and to expose the motives behind a preferred conclusion.

A pragmatic turn

Some researchers who spent years on Kohlberg's approach moved away from it. Krebs and Denton explain in a paper titled "Toward a more pragmatic approach to morality" that they abandoned Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental model after two decades, and they note that people may use moral judgments for instrumental ends, such as exerting social influence, exploiting others, and justifying immoral behaviors.5

That observation applies in organizations. People deploy moral language to win arguments, to shield themselves, or to attack rivals. A leader who hears a polished ethical argument should ask what the person wants and whether the argument would hold if it hurt their interests.

Awareness of this use keeps reasoning honest. The test of a moral argument is whether you would accept it when you are on the receiving end.

Joining logic and empathy

Logic checks consistency. If you say that lying to customers is wrong, you should not accept lying to regulators for the same reasons. Logic also helps compare principles and trace consequences.

Empathy supplies the content. Without it, reasoning treats people as abstractions, and it misses the cost of a decision for the person who bears it. A leader can build empathy by

asking affected people directly, by imagining the decision from their seat, and by hearing stories and not only figures.

Use both together. Draft the analysis, then test it with a person who will bear the consequences. Their reaction often reveals a factor that the analysis missed.

Reasoning in teams

Moral reasoning in groups follows its own dynamics. Members often defer to the most senior voice, or assume that silence means agreement. Leaders can counter this by asking junior people to speak first, by assigning someone to argue the case for the option nobody likes, and by writing down the values at stake before discussing solutions.

Shared language helps. Teams that name the common tensions, such as speed against safety or loyalty against fairness, can talk about them without personalizing the dispute. A short list of principles that the team adopted in calm times gives a reference point when a hard case arrives, and it reduces the temptation to improvise under pressure.

Review hard cases afterward. A thirty-minute discussion of what the team decided, why, and what happened builds a library of precedents that new members can learn from.

A practical routine

Start by naming the decision and the values in tension, such as honesty versus loyalty or safety versus speed. Write the strongest case for each option, as though you wanted it to win. This step checks the pull of your first leaning.

Then list who is affected and how. Include people who have no voice in the room, such as customers, junior staff, or future employees. Ask whether you could explain your choice to each of them face to face.

Finally, consult one trusted person outside the situation. Share the reasoning, and ask where it looks weak. Record the decision and the reasons, and review the result later, because outcomes teach you about your own judgment.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical operations director who discovers that a supplier has been padding invoices in small amounts. The supplier is a long-time partner, and cutting ties would disrupt production. She writes the case for continuing, then the case for stopping, and notes that her first draft for continuing relied mostly on convenience.

She talks with a procurement analyst who would carry the extra work and with a peer who has faced a similar case. She decides to confront the supplier, require repayment, and add audit rights, with an exit plan if the pattern recurs. The case is invented, but it shows how a routine can slow a decision and surface the factors that matter.

Cautions

Do not treat a routine as a guarantee. People can run every step and still reach a poor decision, because their starting values or information were flawed. Stay humble, and welcome challenge.

Avoid using ethical language as a weapon. Charges of immorality shut down conversation, and they often reveal more about the speaker's position than about the facts. Describe actions and effects, and ask questions.

Finally, remember that reasoning is only one part of conduct. Build a culture where people can act on what they judge right, because the best reasoning has no value if it never leaves the weekend.

- 1Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development
- 2Moral minds
- 3Kohlberg's model of moral development and business ethics review
- 4The emotional dog and its rational tail
- 5Toward a more pragmatic approach to morality

Summary

Moral reasoning compares right and wrong by weighing principles, consequences, and the experience of the people affected. Kohlberg described stages of reasoning from avoiding

punishment to acting on personal principles, while critics note that reasoning does not guarantee action and that intuition and social motives shape judgments. Leaders can improve the quality of moral choices by slowing down, naming the values in conflict, hearing affected people, and checking decisions against a trusted peer. Pick one decision you face this month that has an ethical edge, write the strongest case for each option, and ask one affected person what they see.