Virtue Ethics Thinking

Idea In Short

Most workplace ethics training teaches rules and tests consequences. Virtue ethics asks a different question: what kind of person, team, or company do we become through the choices we make? The tradition traces back to Plato and Aristotle, faded for a time, and returned to philosophy in the late twentieth century. Business scholars have since adapted it to explain why character, practices, and institutions matter as much as policies. This article explains the core ideas of virtue, practical wisdom, and flourishing, shows how they apply to managers and organizations, and offers practical ways to build character without turning ethics into a slogan or a checklist.

A sales manager reviews a deal that is legal, profitable, and slightly misleading about delivery dates. Nothing in the policy manual forbids it, and the numbers favor going ahead. She asks herself a different question: "If I make this a habit, what kind of manager am I turning into?" The question is about character, and it changes how the decision looks.

Character before rules

Virtue ethics begins with the person who acts. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes it as the approach that emphasizes virtues, or moral character, in contrast to approaches that emphasize duties or rules and approaches that emphasize consequences. It adds that what distinguishes virtue ethics is the centrality of virtue within the theory, and that its founding figures in the West are Plato and Aristotle.1

A rule-based approach asks, "Is this allowed?" A consequence-based approach asks, "What will result?" A virtue-based approach asks, "What would an honest, fair, and courageous person do here, and what does this choice make of me?"

All three questions have value. The virtue question adds something the others can miss, which is the long-term shaping of the self through repeated choices.

What a virtue is

A virtue is not a single good act. The same encyclopedia entry describes it as a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor, that goes all the way down, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker, and that shapes how a person notices, expects, values, feels, desires, chooses, acts, and reacts. An honest person, on this view, treats "that would be a lie" as a strong reason against a statement and does not merely avoid dishonesty to escape detection.

The implication for managers is that virtue shows up in small, unobserved moments as well as in dramatic ones. Does a person correct a favorable error in a report? Does a leader credit the team in private? These habits indicate character more reliably than a speech.

It also means that virtue is a matter of degree and develops over time. People grow in honesty or courage through practice, example, and reflection.

Practical wisdom

Virtues need judgment to apply. Aristotle called this skill practical wisdom, and later writers treat it as one of the central concepts of the tradition, along with virtue and flourishing. Practical wisdom is what lets a person see which virtue a situation calls for and how to express it. Honesty may call for blunt speech in one setting and gentle framing in another.

A manager who delivers hard news to a struggling employee faces competing claims: truthfulness, kindness, fairness to the team. No rule can settle the balance in advance. Practical wisdom weighs the particulars and finds a response that serves the person and the facts.

Leaders can cultivate this skill by studying cases, discussing them with experienced colleagues, and reflecting on their own decisions. The skill grows through exposure to many situations, much as expertise does in other fields.

From the act to the agent

Business scholars have argued that this shift of focus helps in practice. Dawson and Bartholomew, writing in the Journal of Business Ethics, maintain that by shifting the focus from the act to the agent, virtue ethics overcomes problems that make other approaches

unhelpful in practice. They examine critiques of management and argue for a role for business in being virtuous and promoting virtue.2

Edwin Hartman's book on the virtue approach to business ethics takes a similar stance. A publisher's description says that, focusing on Aristotle's theory that the virtues of character, and not actions, are central to ethics, Hartman argues that business leaders have good reason to take character seriously when explaining and evaluating individuals in organizations.3

For leaders, the practical gain is a richer way to evaluate people. Instead of asking only whether someone met targets within the rules, ask what kind of colleague, manager, and decision maker they are becoming.

Practices, institutions, and internal goods

Alasdair MacIntyre extended virtue ethics into social life through the idea of practices and institutions. Geoff Moore and Ron Beadle argue that MacIntyre's virtues-goods-practice-institution schema offers a conceptual framework within which organizational virtue in general, and virtue in business in particular, can be explored.4

A practice, in this sense, is a cooperative activity with its own standards of excellence, such as medicine, teaching, engineering, or software craft. Internal goods are the rewards of excelling in the practice, such as skill, understanding, and pride in the work. External goods, such as money, status, and power, can be earned in many ways.

Institutions house practices, and they must pursue external goods to survive. The risk, in this view, is that the pursuit of external goods crowds out the internal ones. A hospital that rewards throughput alone may erode the craft of care, and a software firm that rewards shipping dates alone may erode the craft of building.

A research editorial on MacIntyrean virtue ethics for organizations notes that the articles in the collection examine this distinction between internal and external goods and apply MacIntyre's work to work as participation within practices and to meaningful work.5

Corporate character

If individuals have character, do companies? Geoff Moore proposes the concept of corporate character, which he develops from MacIntyre's schema and contrasts with the more familiar ideas of corporate culture and values.6

The idea gives leaders a useful lens. Culture describes how things are done, and values describe what is claimed. Character asks whether the organization consistently acts in ways that reflect real virtues, such as fairness to suppliers and honesty with customers, even when it is costly.

A company can test its character by looking at what it does under pressure. When a quarter goes badly, does it cut corners, or does it protect quality and treat people fairly? The answers show the virtues that run deep.

Building virtue in teams

Start by naming the virtues the work requires. A finance team might need honesty, prudence, and courage. A design team might need curiosity, humility, and care. Write short descriptions of what each virtue looks like in daily work, using examples from your own setting.

Model the virtues. People learn from what leaders do, especially under stress. Share a case where you chose the harder, more honest path, and explain what it cost.

Review decisions against the virtues. In project reviews, add a question such as "Where did we show courage or fall short of it?" Over time, the language of virtue becomes part of how the team thinks. Reward the behavior as well, in promotions and recognition, so that people see that character counts.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical engineering firm in which the culture rewards speed. A project lead discovers that a safety margin was reduced to meet a deadline, and that no regulation covers the change. She asks her team what a careful, honest engineer would do, and what the choice would say about them. The team restores the margin, accepts a two-week delay, and tells the client the reason.

The client appreciates the candor, and the team adds a short virtue review to its project closeouts. The case is invented, but it shows how the language of character can surface a decision that rules and numbers alone would not.

Cautions

Virtue talk can become vague. Words such as integrity and excellence mean little without examples, so tie each virtue to observable behavior.

Beware of moral self-congratulation. People who feel virtuous can become blind to their errors. Pair the language of virtue with humility and with regular feedback from others.

Critics also note that character may depend on situations more than we assume, so leaders should design environments that make good conduct easier. Combine character with sound rules and attention to consequences, since each view catches errors the others miss.

- 1Virtue ethics
- 2Virtues, managers and business people: finding a place for MacIntyre in a business context
- 3Virtue and business ethics, Cambridge University Press
- 4In search of organizational virtue in business
- 5Research topic on MacIntyrean virtue ethics for organizations, work and employment
- 6Corporate character: modern virtue ethics and the virtuous corporation

Summary

Virtue ethics thinking places character at the center of moral decisions. It asks what an honest, fair, and courageous person would do, and it treats practical wisdom as the skill that applies virtue to messy situations. Business researchers have extended the idea to organizations, arguing that practices and institutions shape character, and that pressure for external rewards can crowd out the goods internal to good work. Leaders can build virtue by modeling it, rewarding it, and reviewing hard cases together. This month, name three virtues your team needs, describe what each looks like in daily work, and discuss one recent

decision against them.