

## **Don't trust me because — I don't trust me**

*"The ideals which have always shown before me and filled me with the joy of living are goodness beauty and truth. To make a goal of comfort or happiness had never appealed to me; a system of ethics built on this basis would be sufficient only for a herd of cattle". Albert Einstein*

Some people routinely behave in unethical, immoral and untrustworthy behaviors and hardly ever experience one scintilla of guilt. How is this so?

There's a growing body of evidence that says such folks disengage from their core values, detour from their moral compass and, more than that, consciously forget information that would otherwise limit their inappropriate behavior.

Its quite evident many folks behave dishonestly and then rationalize their dishonest behavior in a way that lets them off the "honesty" hook.

No longer are the criminals the only rule-breakers in our society. The dishonest live and work in virtually every system and organization - finance, politics, healthcare, education - even in our homes; our culture has become inundated by the dishonest and untrustworthy.

The interesting notion, however, is that these blue- and while-collar folks use the same excuses as criminals use for their crimes of dishonesty.

Psychologists tell us that "moral disengagement" and "moral self-regulation" lead to dishonesty. The deal is there are two modes of reacting when - either by commission or omission - one commits a dishonest act: (1) one can link their act to their moral goals and values or (2) one can uncouple their dishonesty from their moral goals and values. We seem to be experiencing more and more of the latter.

When one behaves dishonestly and unethically, one experiences both a mental and physical reaction. Mentally, one experiences cognitive dissonance - a knowing that there is a disconnect between one's act and one's value system, and there is a felt-somatic sense in the body that is experienced as discomfort.

### **So, what to do?**

The curious question is how do folks respond to their dissonance and discomfort? How do they come to grips with their distress? There are those who do the right thing and move into alignment with their core values and moral code. And there are those who go through a rationalization and judgmental process, i.e., "moral disengagement", in order to clear their conscience - in order to view their action as morally permissible.

In addition, there are those who disengage morally in order to benefit from another's dishonest or unethical behavior (e.g., buying clothes from a company that looks the other way, ignores human rights and uses child labor).

### **Questioning myself**

To what extent do I use moral disengagement as a strategy to excuse my or another's unethical actions as permissible? And, why? And, to what extent do I use moral disengagement to actually perpetuate unethical and dishonest behavior - mine and others'?

The vast number of "hypocrites" who have surfaced or been outed (and those who haven't - yet) in recent days, weeks, months and years in the arenas of, for example, politics, sports, finance and religion are a

prime example of the duplicity that moral disengagement perpetuates.

The hypocrisy is couched in the belief that "I engage in more ethical behavior than others." Or, "I am less unfair than others." Or "I have a right to be more suspicious of others' actions than they do of mine." Or, "Others are more greedy and driven by money than I am." Or, "I am more honest and trustworthy than others."

### **Guilt, shame and self-regulation**

The underlying ego-need underlying moral disengagement is to absolve one's self of guilt, blame or shame for their dishonest deeds, of the disconnect existing between their values and their actions. When one decides to act dishonestly, their tendency to morally disengage is higher than when they consider another's unethical behavior. Simply, "I'm ethical and you're not" - given the same dishonest behavior.

The truth is that everyone, repeat, *everyone*, can self-censure. Everyone has the ability to consciously view their actions, and self-regulate, i.e., act morally or not. Everyone has the choice to engage in good behavior or bad behavior and judge their actions.

### **The choice**

The ethical and moral bottom line is whether one chooses to activate their self-regulatory process to consciously consider their values and standards, their moral code, their conduct in the moment.

There are those who choose to not engage their self-regulatory process, to morally disengage. The choice to morally disengage depends to a great extent on the strength of an individual's core values and their motivations.

### **Workplace culture and other environments**

*"It is not always the same thing to be a good man and a good citizen."* - Aristotle

A third factor that affects the degree to which an individual may morally disengage and rationalize dishonesty is the environment and culture in which one finds oneself - work environment, home environment, play environment.

As you reflect on your workplace environment, your home environment, and your recreational environment, what is the culture around dishonesty, cheating, lying, or behaving unethically? What are the tacit, subtle, silent or unwritten rules that reflect immorality, illegality, dishonesty and unethical behavior? Is moral disengagement a "business-as-usual" strategy? Is there a growing sense of pervasive dishonesty?

Given the permissive nature of our culture, the strong force of peer pressure and the almost obsessive need for folks to "fit in" or "stand out" and to be regarded as "somebody" - even those with a strong internal core value system - can often succumb to an unethically permissive environment. Where opportunities, pressure or silent consent drive others to lie, cheat and steal, many will - even the strong-willed.

### **The antidote to moral disengagement**

Folks choose to be ethical or unethical, trustworthy or untrustworthy. There are a number of efforts one can take to support honesty, ethical behavior and trustworthy behavior. Here are a few:

Conducting formal, on-going conversations about ethics and moral behavior. Such experiences can help to

put a stop to some folks' moral disengagement.

Asking individuals, (yes, even at home) to read, discuss and sign a moral code of behavior or honor code. Such actions can help raise people's awareness which can stem the tide of unethical behavior.

Publicly fostering an open agreement by all to live the espoused values of the organization (or family, or team) and having open conversations with others when they do not.

Reviewing processes and procedures that invite dishonesty and moving to enact ways to prevent inappropriate behavior from occurring.

Publicize behaviors and practices that have detrimental organizational and human effects

Increase the transparency of the discussions that give birth to organizational policies and practices. The more discourse, the less folks may engage in moral disengagement.

Initiating consequences. There must be consequences for bad behavior. Period!

### **Self-responsibility - its all about me**

In the final analysis, I am responsible for my actions. "The devil made me do it" and "Everybody does it" excuses do not apply - ever. There is a direct coupling between action, goal and motivation (i.e, core values). I and I alone am responsible for that alignment or misalignment - for moral engagement or moral disengagement. Whether I choose to adhere to my internal moral rules or not, that's my choice.

The sad corollary of moral disengagement is that, like a drug, the need to morally disengage can spiral down into a hellish vortex leading to a life (at work, at home and at play) of obsessive lying, cheating, stealing and dishonesty.

*"The needs of society determine its ethics."* - Maya Aneglou

Living for the moment, driven by greed, caught up in competition and consumerism and living in a workplace and social environment that says, "It's OK to be a criminal", moral disengagement has become the "behavior-du-jour". When we uncouple our behavior from our internal moral code, and detour from our moral compass with an "ends justifies the means" or "everybody does it" mindset, we are putting our individual futures at risk. The Universal Law of Attraction - The Universal Law of the Circle - says what we give out we get back.

Is moral disengagement the underlying life principle of the legacy you want to leave?

### **So, our \$10 food for thought questions are:**

- Is getting ahead more important than how you get there?
- Is cheating OK if no one gets hurt?
- Is unethical behavior OK because others are doing it?
- Do the ends justify the means?
- Are you aware of the ethical standards in your workplace? Are there ongoing discussions about ethics and standards? If not, why not?
- Do you use euphemistic language to sanitize or condone moral disengagement?
- Do you ever use moral disengagement in your personal life to justify unethical or dishonest behavior? If so, why?
- Do you ever encourage others to act without (their considering their own) moral restraint?

- Do you purchase products from companies you know to be in violation of human rights or other ethical standards?
- On a scale of 1-10, how trustworthy would you say you are? What would others say? How do you know?
- Can you envision a life where moral disengagement is never an option?

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Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D, C.P.C. is the founder of True North Partnering an Atlanta-based company that supports conscious living through coaching and facilitating. With a practice based on the dynamic intersection of mind, body, emotion and spirit, Peter's approach focuses on personal, business, relational and spiritual coaching. He is a professional speaker and published author. For more information, [www.truenorthpartnering.com](http://www.truenorthpartnering.com), or [pvajda\(at\)truenorthpartnering.com](mailto:pvajda@truenorthpartnering.com), or phone 770.804.9125. You can also follow Peter on Twitter: @petergvajda