

Ethical Reasoning in the Contemporary Workplace; an Examination via the Experience, Context
& Perspective (ECP) framework

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Abstract

The world of business offers untold examples of how ethical reasoning and morality are intertwined. The exploration of the justification or reasoning behind our actions, (whether philosophical or psychological) and the self-observation behind the decisions executed after ethical reasoning comes into play, are explored here. Additional examples from hero and villain anthologies, to the exploration of psychoanalytic theory, can teach us a great deal about Ethics. Here, the Superego perspective reaches into the boundaries of what we consider comfortable table-side discussions of ethics and morality only to reshape the conventional framework. As the superego is the ethical element of the personality, it delivers the moral principles by which the ego functions. A reflection of said anthologies with classic and contemporary narratives, in addition to real world business practices each offer a unique view of the Superego perspective, which will also be addressed by the ECP framework. This window into the idealized self-image offers a unique view of ethical reasoning and its significance in the contemporary workplace.

Three important questions may be asked when determining one's viewpoint on the role of ethics in the world of business. The first, *within the workplace; why is having a shared understanding of ethics significant?* Second, *how might one's own understanding of ethical standards and ethical reasoning influence those around us?* Lastly, *what impact might not having clear and shared ethical standards have on our workplace culture?* Much like the signs we see when traveling about any given day, (stop signs, cross walks indicating when to proceed, exits or entry-ways), the signs that indicate the need for ethical decision making, are all around us. Answering these questions is one matter, but identifying their importance in the businesses and organizations with which we navigate daily begins with awareness of the signs around us; ethics and morality are factors by which we govern ourselves both personally and professionally.

Awareness

Imagine a world where businesses are connected by the click of a mouse, the stroke of a 10-key or a voice in your hand held super-computer. The opportunity to make a life altering decision with immediacy, to affect a team of employees a continent away, to invest your retirement in minutes over the phone or influence the outcome of a championship game all in an instant. This examination, focused on the significance of maintaining high ethical standards in the workplace, opens the door to understanding that this world is here and now. No longer imagination, but present, visible in the signs all around us. We need only be aware of them. (This is often easier said than done).

In December 2008, Bernie Madoff was arrested for scoring what is known as one of the most debilitating Ponzi schemes in US history. Almost a decade later, victims were still

attempting to reclaim loss from the devastation caused by Madoff's unethical behavior. Flooded with redemption requests at the height of the financial crisis, Madoff confessed his wildly successful investment advisory business was in fact a massive Ponzi scheme. Investors had been told their accounts had grown to some \$65 billion, but in fact Madoff had been fabricating trades for years (Cohn, 2015).

A student or professor of ethics, a researcher in behavioral studies or psychology, or a seasoned business practitioner may draw the same conclusion – the choices made by Madoff were poor, at best. Can he however, be ascribed for an unoriginal idea? Are we aware that unethical business decision making, on a grand scale, began before Madoff? Can we acknowledge that the 24-hour news cycle has allowed us access to observe this type of decision making (with the click of the mouse or the stroke of a 10-key) in a peripatetic capacity?

When Italian native Charles Ponzi began his investment schemes in Boston MA, he was already a two-timed convicted felon who had fallen on hard times after an eventful exit from the banking industry in Montreal, Canada. In 1919, the Italian immigrant promised investors they could yield considerable profits by purchasing international reply coupons from other countries and then redeeming them in the U.S for postage stamps. To legitimize the scheme, Ponzi established the "Securities Exchange Company" based in Boston (Grossman, 2012). Ethical reasoning created a window for Ponzi, like Madoff, to justify the act while in the midst of the duplicity.

In general, Ponzi schemes are run by a central operator, who uses the money from new, incoming investors to pay off the promised returns to older ones. This makes the operation seem profitable and legitimate, even though no actual profit is being made. Meanwhile, the person

behind the scheme pockets the extra money or uses it to expand the operation. To avoid having too many investors reclaim their "profits," Ponzi schemes encourage them to stay in the game and earn even more money. The "investing strategies" used are vague and/or secretive, which schemers claim is to protect their business. Then all they need to do is tell investors how much they are making periodically, without actually providing any real returns (Yang, 2014). It is the concept of "strategy" and approach, leading to justification that allows the scheme to maintain its relevance from the operative's perspective.

Do the victims of Madoff or Ponzi's schemes share responsibility in the outcome of their deception? Were the signs all around them? The answers don't always come from the victims but rather the ethical reasoning decreed by the perpetrator. Steve Fisherman (New York Magazine) interviewed Madoff in the early years of his 150 year sentence in the Federal Correctional Institution in Butner, NC. As part of Madoff's rehabilitation, he reportedly sees a psychiatrist weekly.

"How could I have done this?" he asks. "I was making a lot of money. I didn't need the money. [Am I] a flawed character?" In some ways, Madoff has not tried to evade blame. He has made a full confession, telling me again and again that nothing justifies what he did. And yet, for Madoff, that doesn't settle the matter. He feels misunderstood. He can't bear the thought that people think he's evil. "I'm not the kind of person I'm being portrayed as," he told me. And so, sitting alone with his therapist, in the prison khakis he irons himself, he seeks reassurance. "Everybody on the outside kept claiming I was a sociopath," Madoff told her one day. "I asked her, 'Am I a sociopath?'" He waited expectantly, his eyelids squeezing open and shut, that famous tic. "She said, 'You're absolutely not a sociopath. You have morals. You have remorse.'" Madoff paused as he related this. His voice settled. He said to me, "I am a good person." (Fishman, 2011)

Madoff is now regarded, beyond the boundaries of the business world, as one of the most deceitful criminal minds in history. He has reasoned that although his behaviors were felonious, amounting to a monetary amount of over 170 billion US dollars, he is misunderstood. When asking the questions *why is having a shared understanding of ethics significant* and *how might*

one's own understanding of ethical standards and ethical reasoning influence those around us, is it reasonable to include those who were around Madoff during his deceit in addressing this?

Federal prosecutors thought so.

In August, 2015 at age 77, Irwin Lipkin, former Madoff employee, was sentenced to six months in prison for his part in Madoff's scheme. Lipkin is the last of 15 people convicted in the scam, in which Madoff promised, and appeared on paper to deliver, unrealistic returns on investments. "The roughly \$17.5 billion in principal invested by retirees, charities and other clients over decades was mostly gone — paid out as fake profits or raided by Madoff's family and cronies," according to The Associated Press (Neuman, 2015). Madoff was surrounded by people who had reasoned that their actions were plausible based on the sole fact that they carried them out to fruition. Last year, five former employees of Madoff's firm were also found guilty of conspiracy and securities fraud for helping carry out the elaborate scheme (Neuman, 2015).

By definition, a conspiracy is a plan by multiple people to carry out an unlawful or destructive act. When Madoff and his team of employees carried out their scheme, it was with purpose and justification that was their own. Conspiracism is also motivated by the compelling narrative structures of most conspiracy theories themselves, particularly in their Manichean worldview (Oliver & Wood, 2013). History imparts that the ages old battle between moral and evil, right and wrong, good and bad, is observed in business with consistency. Our ability to detect the warning signs begins with our awareness of their very existence.

The Superego and the superhero

This examination of ethical reasoning in the contemporary workplace turns inward as we must explore the psychological element that influences both the business decisions and the

historical context aligned with our own morality. Ongoing research and study focused on leadership, self-efficacy (Albert Bandura, 1977), behavioral studies and cognitive theory, have led to the application of the comic book genre as an additional path to understanding the larger discussion. In our youth, we may have been pre-disposed to recognizing an ethical decision when played out in a 25 minute animated short or on the pages of an illustrated comic. This unassuming exposure becomes hallmark to this dialog of ethics and morality.

The catalog of comics and animated series' that contributed to this case study included many pop culture favorites. DC Comics' Batman (first appearing in 1939 – Detective Comics #27 and later in Batman #1, 1940) offered a flawed caped crusader with a troubled past. The story of Bruce Wayne (alias) begins with his parent's fatal mugging in Gotham City. This crime would help to define his life's work, as he dedicated himself to becoming the world's greatest weapon against crime (The Dark Knight, 2015). Other printed works, included Walking Dead and Spawn (Image Comics), HALO, Fall-out and Avatar (Dark Horse Comics) and Transformers, GI JOE, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (IDW), each with a half hour or hour presence on television. In each of these works, the antagonist and protagonist alike face a moral dilemma that not only challenges them in the present but causes them (and those around them) to question their moral compass. Their ethical reasoning and decision making was the focal point of any given pressing matter where they were called to lead or take action. Their life experiences, the context with which they viewed the matter at hand and their resulting perspective (shared with others) all factored into their eventual behaviors.

The work of Sigmund Freud and other noted psychologists allowed for the connection drawn from childhood behavior to adult ethical reasoning in this study to take shape. Dallmayr (1989) observed that in the decades preceding the 1990's, antagonism, prevailed primarily

between those supporting “id psychology” and those supporting “ego” and “superego psychology.” He determined that in large measure, the conflict centered around the definition of human nature with proponents of the two schools stressing unconscious, inner-psychic and moral or interpersonal components respectively (p. 467). While Freud’s Psychoanalytic theory of human behavior has been debated and contested over the last century by theorists, psychologist and academics alike, the basis of his concept and underlining terminology are used today in the ongoing discussion of ethics, morality and human behavior.

The three components of this theory are the Id, Ego and Superego. If the id represents those instinctual impulses we have from birth and the superego (which we will further explore here), represents the reasoning developed prior to our pre-teen years, than the ego manages the checks and balances needed to govern the two. By the time he (Freud) formulated the role of the superego in the structural model, the concept had become much more complex, interwoven with a deeper understanding of ideas about aggression, narcissism, mourning, the ego ideal, and so forth. Anna Freud (1936) made an important dimension explicit when she noted that the superego is an expression of conflict and a function of conflict—that the superego is indistinguishable from the ego until a conflict arises (Novick & Novick, 2004).

The superego is the ethical component of the personality and provides the moral standards by which the ego operates. The superego’s criticisms, prohibitions, and inhibitions form a person’s conscience, and its positive aspirations and ideals represent one’s idealized self-image, or “ego ideal.” In the instance of Madoff, it is the ego ideal that related his desire to be understood and seen as “a good person.”

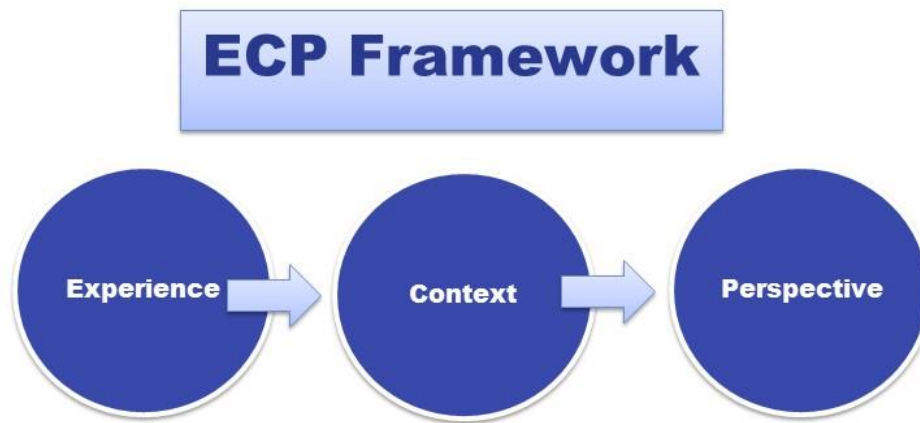
The ego ideal had already appeared formally in 1914, emerging as the substitute for the narcissism lost in childhood because of parental criticism and demands. It becomes a model that the ego seeks to attain in order to recover some of the feeling of perfection that was lost. Functions later related to the superego, such as self-observation, dream censorship and disturbances such as melancholy and delusions of observation were, in 1921, ascribed to the ego ideal, that later became an aspect of the superego (Rudge, 2003). In the framework developed by writer Bill Finger and artist Bob Kane, the character of Bruce Wayne struggles for a sense of perfection as viewed through (what he perceived to be) his parents' idealized perspective. The superego develops during the first five years of life in response to parental punishment and approval. This development occurs as a result of the child's internalization of his parents' moral standards, a process greatly aided by a tendency to identify with the parents.

Experience, Context and Perspective – the ECP framework

When addressing the question, *'how might one's own understanding of ethical standards and ethical reasoning influence those around you,' we must first examine ourselves.* As professionals, drivers of business, those in leadership roles and those who aspire to lead, we must first conduct our own self-observation. When I first developed and introduced the ECP framework via a series of professional development workshops, I found the feedback from students and my colleagues in the academy to be extraordinary. The commonalities found among each group, reinforced the connections found via the framework.

The ECP framework emphasizes the connection between experience, context and perspective. Our individual lived *experiences* influence the *context* with which we view any given situation, and in turn influence and shape the *perspectives* we bring to the table. The

experiences, which exist without need of a time frame or outside objectivity in their description, are purely our own. They are not designated for meaning nor understanding by those around us. Whether they occurred with the benefit of an audience of many or if they took place before an audience of one, they are our individual experiences, recollected upon as our own psychological development retains them to be. It is this uniqueness that is the first component of the ECP framework - *experience*.



Johnson, J.B. (2015). Experience, Context & Perspective framework [model]. *DrJalin.com*. Available from <http://drjalin.com/2015/02/13/experience-context-perspective-ecp-framework/>

Much like the ego-ideal, our experiences catalog our observations with meaning. We draw upon these experiences, much like the ego-ideal interprets what we discern via the superego perspective. Our observations of the parental or authority figures in our lives during the formation and development of the super-ego translate into a sense of what is “right” versus what is “wrong.” In late 2015, it was reported that Aurora, IL native and former Speaker of the US House of Representatives (1999 – 2007), Dennis Hastert, had been hospitalized. The unfortunate news of this health scare, reported by his attorney Thomas Green as a stroke, reignited already simmering news about his pending federal sentencing scheduled for early 2016. Hastert pleaded

guilty on October 28 (of that previous year) to a felony count of illegally structuring cash withdrawals to evade bank currency reporting requirements. His plea agreement with prosecutors recommends a sentence ranging from probation to up to six months behind bars — the lowest possible sentence under federal guidelines for anyone convicted of a felony (Meisner, 2015).

The felony itself received scrutiny for its seemingly unethical nature due to the dollar amount of each reported withdrawal by Hastert. The ethical reasoning enacted by the former Speaker was the initial step, leading to him withdrawing a dollar amount just short of the ten thousand dollar mark. This was in hopes of avoiding suspicion of committing a felony act that he is suspected to have been formally familiar with. After bank officials warned Hastert in April 2012 that such large withdrawals had to be reported to financial regulators, he began illegally structuring the transactions in increments of less than \$10,000 to avoid federal reporting requirements, according to the plea agreement. Over the next 2 1/2 years, Hastert made a total of 106 withdrawals in increments of less than \$10,000, totaling \$952,000 (Meisner, 2015).

Hastert's experience with financial regulators and his understanding (based on said experience) influenced the context with which he viewed his actions. When FBI agents questioned Hastert about the withdrawals at his Plano home last December, he lied by claiming he was keeping the cash he had been withdrawing "in a safe place," the plea agreement stated. The indictment said Hastert told agents he was wary of the banking system (Meisner, 2015).

The second component of the ECP framework – *context*, addresses “how” we see or view a given situation based on our past experiences. Our ethical reasoning is exposed internally in this phase, as it requires us to continue our self-observation by framing our justification for the view we now maintain. When various members of management approach the same situation,

receiving the same data, each having the same or similar years of experience and education needed to meet said job requirements, they inevitably bring their past experiences to the table. This is not done concisely but rather as a result of years of psychoanalytic development that has taken place unbeknownst to them. Their view of said scenario that they are now faced with making a decision regarding, is viewed within a context, influenced by their individual, unique experiences.

The third and final component of the ECP framework – *perspective*, is shaped by the context with which we now view the situation in front of us. Philosophical and Psychological differences separate ethical reasoning into two parts. The philosophical, much like what we see with the examples of Madoff and Hastert, display how we justify these ethical judgments. Before the start of Game 2 in the 2015 Major League Baseball World series, (played between the National League champion New York Mets and the American League champion Kansas City Royals), Royal's management applied their own ethical reasoning and executed a decision.

Nightengale (2015);

“It was an eerie feeling, keeping a secret from the man pitching the biggest game of the season for your club, and not quite sure you were doing the right thing. The national TV audience knew it. Most of the fans at Kauffman Stadium knew it. The Kansas City Royals' management, and even some of their players, knew it. Edinson Volquez didn't know a thing... Volquez's father, Daniel, a hard-working mechanic who provided him with his first baseball glove, was dead. He died earlier in the day in the Dominican Republic after battling a heart disease for several years. He was 63. “The whole time I kept thinking, Eddie was out there pitching his tail off,” Yost (Royal's Manager) said, “and I kept thinking, his dad isn't watching him. His first start in a World Series and his dad isn't watching him. “I was really monitoring him. He was happy, upbeat. He was there talking to all of his friends. Ok, he doesn't know anything. “It was hard for me to know what I know, and see the way he competed. It was a sad situation. There was no road map. You just do what the family asked you to do. It was real special to them that Eddie goes out and pitches that game.”

Ned Yost, having had the experience of being a former MLB catcher, over a decade of experience as an MLB Manager and having recently been tasked with consoling two other Royals' players, both of whom were in a game, playing during the loss of a parent (in the same regular season), viewed Volquez's situation with a familiar context, allowing his perspective to be shaped accordingly. The ethical reasoning behind Yost agreeing to the family's wishes to not share this news with his star pitcher was, from his perspective, *justified*. The initial experience Yost faced influenced the context which in turn shaped his perspective on how to approach the situation the next time it was raised, leading, inevitably to another personal, unique experience from his vantage point.

The nature of the ECP framework allows one to understand that each of these phases in the framework continuously influence the next. Having viewed this from the individual's vantage point, we might also examine this from that of an organization.

Reason and commonality

When asking *what impact might not having clear and shared ethical standards have on your workplace culture*, we can look to a company's decision to outsource for an example. The psychological component of ethical reasoning suggests how we *create* ethical judgments. In business, the concept of outsourcing has taken on its own brand in the nomenclature. For some, it is the unspoken (scary) word which leads to jobs lost. For others, it is a cost effective way of doing business that can "save" a company's bottom line. Mani and Barua (2015) found complexities within the world of information technology (IT) as it relates to the context within which outsourcing is applied in a given business context.

Over the past decade, the outsourcing of information technology (IT) and IT-enabled business processes has emerged as an imperative for firm competitiveness. These modern outsourcing forms are distinct from traditional outsourcing such as contract manufacturing or facilities management; the quality of output in the latter is largely tangible, observable and verifiable. In contrast, significantly greater uncertainty is associated with the execution of outsourced business processes and technologies... The execution of (these) more strategic tasks is often idiosyncratic to a firm's context and may not be easily replicable across multiple client contexts. Furthermore, value creation in these settings may be contingent on complementary investments in communication, coordination, and collaboration with the vendor(s). (Pg. 2)

In the world of business, it has been observed that the decision to enter into an outsourcing partnership is not taken lightly. As noted, the company and its employees will undoubtedly undergo a shift in their dynamic that will inevitably alter the workplace environment. From the early instances of protectionism, where industries (nationwide) were thought to be protecting themselves from foreign competition via the use of import taxation, the debate on whether to outsource has continued to develop adversarial divides in large and small businesses alike.

Duan, et al. (2014), noted that outsourcing has emerged as a key trend in contemporary business environments. Over the last 15 years, outsourcing has migrated from the procurement of non-core, support services to virtually every activity of a firm (Gottfredson, Puryear, and Phillips 2005). Outsourcing is also considered to be a strategic priority (Holcomb and Hitt 2007). Rather than a method of contracting out, outsourcing is now increasingly being adopted as a weapon to transform the way of conducting businesses to achieve rapid, sustainable improvement in value chain (VC) level competitive performance (Linder, Cole, and Jacobson 2002; Linder 2004). ‘

The ethical reasoning, the company's logic, behind their decision making to outsource is not always shared by those whose jobs are directly impacted by this decision. A difference in ethical standards or an unclear shared vision for how the company will attain growth,

(perspective), is drawn from the context influenced by the company's past financial and development experience.

Entrepreneur Andrew Grove, before passing away in March 2016, was known to encourage those in the world of business from his established Silicon Valley empire, about the progressive loss of job growth in the United States, due in part to the results of outsourcing as a business standard. In a candid OpEd written for Bloomberg Business, Grove shared his outlook.

Grove (2010) wrote;

Not far from Intel's headquarters in Santa Clara, Calif., other companies developed. Tandem Computers went through a similar process, then Sun Microsystems, Cisco (CSCO), Netscape, and on and on. Some companies died along the way or were absorbed by others, but each survivor added to the complex technological ecosystem that came to be called Silicon Valley. As time passed, wages and health-care costs rose in the U.S. China opened up. American companies discovered that they could have their manufacturing and even their engineering done more cheaply overseas. When they did so, margins improved. Management was happy, and so were stockholders. Growth continued, even more profitably. But the job machine began sputtering...You could say, as many do, that shipping jobs overseas is no big deal because the high-value work—and much of the profits—remain in the U.S. That may well be so. But what kind of a society are we going to have if it consists of highly paid people doing high-value-added work—and masses of unemployed? (Pg. 3-4)

What Grove (2010) underlined was at the core of how ethical reasoning in business is parlayed. The philosophical judgment call by the company to outsource is validated by the pending financial gain. What Grove and others noted was that the long term influence on the organization or given workplace was uncharted and leading towards an economic shortcoming in the job sector witnessed by a lack of employees with a developed skills base in the very positions and tasks being outsourced. We are only in the beginning stages of exploring the impact this decision has on the workplace culture, but the premise is vibrant.

Grove (2010) concluded;

Since the early days of Silicon Valley, the money invested in companies has increased dramatically, only to produce fewer jobs. Simply put, the U.S. has become wildly inefficient at creating American tech jobs. We may be less aware of this growing inefficiency, however, because our history of creating jobs over the past few decades has been spectacular—masking our greater and greater spending to create each position. Should we wait and not act on the basis of early indicators? I think that would be a tragic mistake, because the only chance we have to reverse the deterioration is if we act early and decisively...There's more at stake than exported jobs. With some technologies, both scaling and innovation take place overseas. (Pgs. 3-5).

A Call to Culture

It can be concluded in the short term that our earliest determinations of what is right and wrong, as noted by the works of Freud at the turn of the 20th century, influence our lives into adulthood, both personally and professionally. Beyond Psychoanalytic theory and the works of those who followed Freud (Adler, Jung and others), exploration of the superego perspective allows us to better understand the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators behind the ethical decision making of those in leadership roles within an organization.

Exploring the influences this reasoning has on our workplace culture and understanding the influence this has on those around us, begins with our own awareness that having a shared understating of ethics can bring. This not only influences motivation, but also morale which in turn leads to sustainability in our growing workforce. While reading the signs and working to alter the outcome of poor decision making may mean donning the cape of a superhero, (also easier said than done), the heroic effort is in utilizing one's own ethical reasoning to determine whether an injustice is taking place. The superego, (the ethical element of the personality), governs these moral principles by which the ego functions. The window into the idealized self-image as discussed in this case through the view of the ECP framework, allows for one view of

ethical reasoning and its significance in the contemporary workplace to be perceived.

Understanding that the seeds of wisdom can be planted no matter the soil type, it is up to the individual, those in leadership roles and those who develop and maintain a company's vision in the contemporary workplace that must collect mentors, seek guidance and work to enhance the process that is ethical reasoning. Only then can we reach beyond the boundaries of what we consider comfortable table-side discussions of ethics and morality, thus reshaping the conventional framework

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