

Case Studies in Leadership Ethics

“Resolving an ill-structured problem often requires consideration of competing values and multiple social obligations. Finding resolution to an ethical problem often requires an individual to consider two or more dialectically opposed options, each of which provides only a partial, incomplete solution. No matter how a person chooses to act when confronted with such a problem, they will undoubtedly experience regret about the situation. [] recognize these competing values in the decision-making process.”

(D.C. Keyes, 2002, in Journal of Management Education, Vol. 26, No.3, p.307-321)

This is a suggested list of cases involving ethical decision-making and complex choices in leadership conduct. Below are descriptions of each case and links to resources to help you begin to investigate the case.

NASA

A case study in expert leadership and organizational culture

Space – the final frontier. We are a nation which prides itself on its space exploration program. After all, under president J.F. Kennedy, we put a man on the Moon and returned him safely to Earth. But the space shuttle program has been plagued with disasters. On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded on launch, costing the lives of all aboard. Investigate the decision-making that led NASA administration to go for launch in spite of technical issues with the space shuttle’s O rings. Roger Boisjoly was an engineer at Morton Thiokol, the company that produced the O rings for NASA’s space shuttles. He and other engineers tried, but failed to stop the launch of the Challenger. He then testified in the investigation into the Challenger disaster. Yet on February 1, 2003, disaster struck again when the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated on reentry. The investigation into the Columbia disaster found problems with NASA’s organizational culture continued after Challenger. As you analyze this case, put yourself in the shoes of Roger Boisjoly. Evaluate how different people weigh in on two contradicting values: the spirit of exploration, and a culture of safety.

- <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5175151>
- <http://www.madisoncourier.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=253&ArticleID=22475&TM=54076.17>
- <http://www.elmhurst.edu/~bridgeto/eng531web/marlene's%20Annotated%20Bibliography.htm>
- <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,426586,00.html>
- <http://history.nasa.gov/columbia/index.html>
- http://www.space.com/missionlaunches/caib_report_030826.html

Mt. Everest

A case study in team leadership

Climbing the highest mountain on Earth is a formidable challenge to the human body and spirit. The Mt. Everest disaster refers to a single day in the 1996 climbing season, May 11, 1996, when eight people from three teams died, including two team leaders. What is most intriguing about the events is that two leaders, American Scott Fisher and New Zealander Rob Hall, perished trying to assist others down the mountain, and in doing so, lost their own lives. Put yourself in the shoes of the expedition leaders. Evaluate the decision-making of the leaders to stay and assist weak climbers rather than descending to save their own lives. Evaluate how different people view the deteriorating ethics on Everest as its death toll continues to grow, and while climbers refuse to risk their once-in-a-lifetime investment to help a dying climber.

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1996_Everest_Disaster
- http://outside.away.com/outside/destinations/199609/199609_into_thin_air_1.htm
- http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2006/05/28/a_question_of_ethics_on_mt_everest_climbers_death_sparks_debate/?page=1
- <http://www.progressiveu.org/015809-two-men-left-for-dead-the-ethics-of-everest>
- <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20003830/>

Hurricane Katrina

A case study in public leadership and social structure

When Hurricane Katrina passed east of New Orleans on August 29, 2005, the storm surge caused levee breaches resulting in severe loss of lives. Rescue efforts dragged on, and looting and violence broke out in the aftermath of the storm. The U.S. House of Representatives created the Select Bipartisan Committee to investigate the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. Evaluate the ethical responsibility for disaster management by our government agencies and elected leaders. As you analyze this large and complex case, put yourself in the shoes of Major Ray Nagin. Assess the social structures that led to civic unrest in Katrina's aftermath. Compare with the Johnstown flood of May 31, 1889.

- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4201480.stm>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effect_of_Hurricane_Katrina_on_New_Orleans#Loss_of_life
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_government_response_to_Hurricane_Katrina
- <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9063708/>
- http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/article.php?id_article=859

- <http://www.johnstownpa.com/History/hist19.html>
- <http://usparks.about.com/cs/parkhistory/a/johnstownflood.htm>

Enron

A case study in corporate leadership and corporate culture

In just 15 years, Enron grew from nowhere to be one of America's largest companies. Enron was a high-flying corporation, a leader in energy trade. The collapse of Enron in 2001, amid questionable accounting practices, which represents the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history, led to thousands of employees losing their life savings in retirement plans tied to the company's stock. Put yourself in the shoes of Enron whistleblower Sherron Watkins. Evaluate how Enron's leadership and corporate culture contributed to the company's downfall. Comment on the Sarbanes-Oxley Act.

- <http://www.commondreams.org/views02/0216-01.htm>
- <http://www.aicpa.org/pubs/jofa/apr2002/thomas.htm>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enron_scandal
- http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/infrastructure/power/enron_time.html
- <http://money.cnn.com/news/specials/enron/>
- http://www.ajschuler.com/enron_s_corporate_culture.html

Framework for Developing your Presentation and Discussion of Cases of Alleged Ethical Misconduct:

Students in each group decide how to research and prepare for the presentation of their case. All group members should participate equally in preparing the presentation.

The following questions are suggested as a framework to analyze the case. Groups are free to develop their own questions and outline.

Note that sections I and II of the framework below present the information the presenters will find in researching the case. Sections III and IV are used to involve the audience in your presentation and facilitate discussion about the case and what is important to learn from it.

I. Background

1. What are the relevant facts of the case?
2. What is the setting?
3. What is time frame?
4. Who are the people involved?
5. Who are the primary stakeholders?

II. Ethical issues and values

1. What are the values or ethical issues that may have been breached in this case?
2. What is the evidence to support allegations of ethical violations?
3. What actions were taken or not taken that resulted in the breach of ethics in this case?
4. Were there any circumstances cited in terms of personal problems, pressures or environmental factors that explain this breach in ethics? And if so, do you find them credible?

III. Consequences and Outcomes

1. What were the outcomes for the people involved in the case?
2. Were the outcomes or sanctions commensurate with the ethical breach?
3. What are the consequences of the breach in ethics?
4. Can you imagine circumstances that would mitigate the culpability of this violation of ethical principles?
5. Who suffered/suffers as a consequence of this ethical breach?
6. What were/are the costs to society?

IV. Recommendations

1. In the case you examined, what actions should have been taken and by whom to prevent the violation of ethics?
2. What recommendations would you make to the scientific and academic communities of researchers and scholars that might prevent such episodes in the future?
3. Is this case worth our knowing about today? Why or why not? Who would most directly benefit from knowing about or studying this case?