

## Character, Leadership, and the Healthcare Professions

### **Elizabeth Holmes, PhD, ABPP**

CAPT, Medical Service Corps, United States Navy (RET)  
Director for Assessment  
VADM James Bond Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership  
United States Naval Academy  
Annapolis, Maryland USA  
Tel: (410) 293-6088  
Email: ekholmes@usna.edu

### **Editorial Note**

This following is the text of the first of the conference's distinguished lectures. This lecture was presented in the morning of Tuesday, December 8, 2009. A panel and general delegate discussion followed.

### **Author's Note**

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Ms. Rose Ciccarelli in editing the manuscript. The opinions represented in this text are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or positions of the United States Government, the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, or Navy Medicine.

### **Abstract**

The presentation by Elizabeth Holmes, PhD, summarized the integration of character and leadership development in the education of healthcare professionals. Citing the mission, vision, values, graduate attributes, and various examples of current programs and initiatives from both the United States Naval Academy and the University of Botswana, the presentation explained the importance of professional development based on ethical leadership and courageous moral decision making. In this regard, this distinguished lecture gave visible expression to the conference title, "Understanding Ethics and Integrity in Healthcare, Medicine, and Research."

*Keywords:* Ethical leadership, healthcare, profession, moral decisions

### **Introduction**

Mr. P. Khulumani, Director of the Ministry of Health, Botswana, Your Excellency Ambassador Nolan, and distinguished leaders of the Government of Botswana and the University, colleagues, students, and friends:

# Lectures

---

It is a deep honor to be with you all today and lead this morning session. I am honored and privileged to follow Archbishop Tutu's outstanding presentation. Like him, I feel "a little bit breathless" to speak in front of such an audience. Thank you for inviting me and asking me to be part of this important conference.

I invite you to join me this morning on a transformative path of professional growth. Let us together travel the journey outlined by the United States Naval Academy (USNA) and University of Botswana (UB) to becoming leaders of character.

## Mission and Vision

What could the United States Naval Academy and the University of Botswana have in common?

Each has a timeless mission: At the USNA, it is "to develop midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically and to imbue them with the highest ideals of duty, honor, and loyalty in order to graduate leaders who are dedicated to a career of Naval service and have potential for future development in mind and character to assume the highest responsibilities of command, citizenship, and government."

The vision at the USNA is to provide leaders of great character, competence, vision, and drive to transform the Navy and Marine Corps and serve the nation in a century of promise and uncertainty.

The mission of the UB School of Medicine is "to prepare skillful, productive, ethical, and compassionate physicians who advance and apply in humanistic and professional manner scientific discovery and technological innovation to health care needs of individual patients, their families, and larger societal groups." Specifically, the University of Botswana states that it will "provide excellence in the delivery of learning to ensure society is provided with talented, creative, and confident graduates."

To achieve its vision, the University of Botswana values its students, as is shown by its pursuit of "creating a holistic environment which ensures that learning is their central focus and by establishing a range of learning, social, cultural, and recreational opportunities that will facilitate the full realization of their potential for academic and personal growth." The University of Botswana also values "cultural authenticity by ensuring that the diversity of Botswana's indigenous values and cultural heritage forms an important part of the academic and organizational life of the institution." Clearly, culture plays an important role in all human interactions. Isn't it interesting that both the University of Botswana and the Naval Academy are invested in the importance of valuing culture?

## Curriculum for Developing Ethical Leaders

Midshipmen learn about ethical leadership at the USNA through a combination of classroom instruction, personal learning, and professional interactions. The goal is for midshipmen to understand leadership and what it means to be a leader of character. During their four years, midshipmen study leadership, human behavior, ethics, law, and character, along with individual, group, and organizational behavior.

In their first year, midshipmen learn about organizational dynamics and how to lead themselves. The following year, they focus on ethics and moral reasoning for the military leader. In their third year, midshipmen take a class on leadership theories and applications. In their final year, the classroom training focuses on law for the junior officer and technical skills for their selected service.

Midshipmen attend the Capstone Moral Leadership Seminar their last year. It is their final academic opportunity to discuss and apply concepts related to leadership, character, and ethics learned over the previous years before they leave the USNA for the fleet. In this seminar, midshipmen are also exposed to Last Call, an interactive simulation that teaches ethical decision-making. Last Call can be downloaded on the web at [www.usna.edu/ethics](http://www.usna.edu/ethics).

### Graduate Attributes and Professionalism

What else do both academic institutions value in their graduates? Each school has identified nine desired attributes. At the USNA, graduate attributes include: to be prepared to be role models of ethical behavior and moral conduct, to be courageous leaders who take responsibility for their personal and professional decisions and actions, and to be leaders who recognize and value individual excellence regardless of gender or cultural and ethnic background. The UB aims to create graduates who are “independent, confident, self-directed, critical thinkers, professionally competent, reflective parishioners, innovative, socially responsible, and thereby marketable and competitive nationally and internationally.”

Along with a degree, the USNA graduate receives a commission into either the Navy or the Marine Corps. Borrowing from the work of Samuel P. Huntington, officership as taught at the Naval Academy is the practice of being a commissioned Naval officer inspired with a unique professional identity that incorporates four interrelated roles: warfighter, servant of the nation, member of the Naval profession, and leader of character.

Similarly, upon graduating from the UB School of Medicine, the title Medical Doctor will be bestowed. The graduate enters a profession where the practice of being a licensed physician or nurse or dentist brings a unique professional identity that incorporates four interrelated roles: medical expertise, servant of the nation, member of the profession, and leader of character. Professionalism is at the heart of the healthcare profession. A profession is seen as a special type of vocation when it includes expertise, responsibility, and corporateness. I would also add a fourth — as both the Naval Academy and the University of Botswana do: leader of character.

The medical professional is an expert with specialized knowledge and skill. Expertise is acquired through prolonged education and often painful experiences. Institutions of advanced education and research are required for the extensive learning and transfer of that information. Continued professional contact is evidenced by ongoing education in the form of journals and conferences. The healthcare professional is a practicing expert, working in a social context, performing a public service, such as promotion of health, which is imperative for the public good. The medical profession as a whole is a moral entity based on self-imposed professional ethics and inspired by identified values that guide its members. The members of the healthcare profession share a strong sense of group consciousness. This bond of dedicated work and social concern is illustrated by the members' professional organizations and clear levels of competency. Being a professional is a lifelong calling.

How do we describe leaders of character in a profession? Leadership is the process of influencing others to accomplish a goal. Character is composed of those moral qualities that make up the nature of a leader and shape his or her actions. The leader of character seeks the truth, does what is right, and demonstrates the moral courage in the face of adversity to act accordingly. Becoming a leader of character, according to VADM James B. Stockdale, entails setting noble goals of great moral worth, taking active steps to pursue those goals, being willing in pursuit of those noble goals to accept costs and pay the price personally, and being willing to ask, even order, those close to you to accept similar costs and to pay a similar price. In *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, Stockdale wrote, "We as warriors must keep foremost in our minds that there are boundaries to the prerogative of leadership: moral boundaries. . . failure of leadership's nerve and character are terminal, catastrophic. . ."

### VADM James B. Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership

Our mission is to "empower leaders to make courageous ethical decisions."

What characteristics make good leaders? The literature on leadership suggests that good leaders share the following attributes:

1. Self-knowledge: They know their own strengths and weaknesses and can live in their own skin.
2. Consistent behavior: They have a steady, predictable manner.
3. Ability to communicate: They do not under-communicate as most people do.
4. Compelling vision: They have a magnetism that inspires and energizes people.
5. Act as agent of change: They understand that change is constant.

In the final analysis, good leadership comes down to these four C's:

1. Competence: Good leaders are committed to being good at what they do.
2. Confidence: People want to know what their leaders think, and those leaders have enough desirable self-confidence to communicate their perspective.
3. Caring: People need to know and feel that their leaders care about them.
4. Challenge: Good leaders perceive problems as challenges, not obstacles.

What would help leaders to make courageous ethical decisions? Leaders need a practical, pragmatic tool for making moral choices. They need a systematic way to recognize issues, decide what to do, and then act on their intentions, particularly when there is no time for reflection.

### Teaching Ethical Decision Making

Several years ago, I started to explore the idea of using interactive multimedia simulations as a way to develop courageous ethical leaders. Research on the subject found that ethical decisions are influenced by moral intensity. Thomas Jones (1991) identified four moral intensity factors that affect decision making. These variables influence people in varying degrees, based on the power of the situation. The first factor is social consensus, what we believe our group thinks about the moral dilemma. The second factor is proximity, or the cultural, physical, psychological, or social nearness of the decision maker to those affected

by the moral decision. The third factor, magnitude of consequences, refers to the degree of harm or benefit from the decision-maker's action. The last factor is probability of effect, or the likelihood that harm or benefit will occur. The moral intensity of the situation increases as the magnitude and probability of effect increase.

James Rest (1994) pioneered a four-component approach to decision making, which combines cognitive-development, social, behavioral, and psychoanalytic perspectives. Rest asserts that, when confronted with an ethical dilemma, individuals move from moral awareness, the recognition of a moral situation; to moral judgment, the evaluation of choices and outcomes; to moral intention, choosing how one intends to act; and lastly to moral action, the actual behavior in the situation. A failure at any place in the process could result in a failure to make an ethical decision.

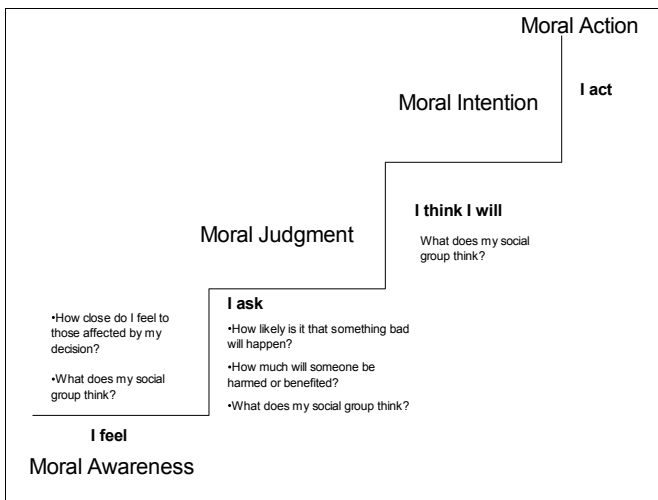


Figure 1. Ethical decision-making model.

In the first step, there is gut-level recognition that the situation is morally charged. Moral emotions such as anger, fear, shame, or empathy are aroused. The decision-maker's gut is answering the question: "Is there something wrong here?" Is a person, community, or ideal at risk? Is there a dimension of right and wrong here, or are competing values at work?

Assuming that the situation raises an ethical issue, the next step is to weigh various rational options. The aim is to distinguish right from wrong, better from worse, and between competing obligations. The decision-maker is also weighing possible actions. These kinds of questions may be asked:

1. What action produces the most good and the least harm?
2. What action respects everyone's rights and dignities?
3. What action treats everyone equally—or if not equally, then at least proportionately and fairly? How would I want to be treated?
4. What kind of person will I be if I act or do not act in this situation?

## Lectures

---

The next step is to decide what to do or not do. Deciding what to do also means marshaling the courage to act, often in the face of great opposition.

Sometimes, people can recognize an ethical dilemma, decide “the right thing to do,” resolve to act, and yet do not. The power of other people present is a common explanation used for failing to act morally. In this last step, a person carries out his or her decision, in spite of opposition or possible consequences.

We validated these theories with research on populations of midshipmen and Navy chaplains. The next step was to develop a systematic way in which people could recognize issues, decide what to do, and then act on ethical dilemmas, particularly under stressful conditions. Our approach was to combine an interactive multimedia simulation with a practical, pragmatic model for making ethical decisions in real time.

The Stockdale Center has produced a DVD library of five simulations with a selection of moral dilemmas. Midshipmen, enlisted, and junior officers encounter many situations that have ethical dimensions, and they learn a systematic, logical process to help resolve these dilemmas. Because the situations often involve universal issues—such as fairness, truth-telling, determining how to deal with inappropriate behavior—ethical decision-making skills learned in a realistic computer environment can be applied to real-life situations. Participants can practice making hard choices and face possible consequences in a safe cyber-environment.

How do these simulations work? Imagine that you are playing a character and immersed in a realistic world that you see on your computer screen. Your peers in this world look to you as a social leader. You’re presented with a situation that you sense has moral and ethical dimensions. Maybe there’s a party where underage girls attend. Maybe you discover a possible sexual assault. Maybe your best friend is asking you to go along with a deception. Maybe your ambition places your future in jeopardy. Whatever the situation, you’re faced with a series of decisions. Because the simulation is interactive, every choice you make spins the narrative off in a different direction. Each choice or combination of choices brings ramifications and consequences. You can experience how your decisions affect the outcome. The first time you grapple with the scenario’s dilemmas, you do so instinctively, without guidance, hoping for a positive outcome.

A tutorial accompanying the simulation then provides the guidance. Each of the simulations comes with a practical, step-by-step model that walks you through a decision-making process, going from moral awareness through moral action. After this tutorial, you have the opportunity to return to the scenario and experience it again, applying the steps in the tool to work your way through the dilemma.

Learning to apply an ethical leadership decision-making model assists the learner in developing the moral “muscle memory” required in high-stress, morally ambiguous situations. Difficult ethical decision making becomes easier when it is built on a foundation of ongoing practice. Learning to walk the steps from moral awareness is an indispensable skill for an ethical leader.

We have been able to teach ethical decision making, using cutting-edge technology developed by Will Interactive, an award-winning producer of interactive educational technology. Will Interactive is a pioneer of a new genre of education and entertainment media known as the virtual experience and has trademarked the virtual experience immersive simulation (VEILS) system. Over the past four years, using interactive simulations combined with an ethical decision-making model has yielded positive quantitative and qualitative assessment results. More than 5,000 future Naval officers have learned to be better ethical leaders through this engaging educational technology.

### Conclusion

The shared wisdom in Botswana about patients and doctors provides its own take on ethical decision making. Julie Livingston writes in *Debility and Moral Imagination in Botswana* that the “essential character of each Tswana person is unique....” She goes on to highlight each chapter with a Setswana proverb that I found also applies to each step in ethical decision making.

Moral Awareness: “Pelo e ntle ke leswalo la motho.” = A good heart is the medicine of a person.

Moral Judgment: “O se tshege o oleng, mareledi a sale pele.” = Do not laugh at the fallen; there are slippery places ahead.

Moral Intention: “O re go lemoga ngaka le bolwetse o bo lemoge.” = If you are too smart to pay the doctor, you had better be too smart to get sick.

Moral Action: “Moeng ngaka, o sididila babobodi.” = A visitor’s arrival, like a doctor’s, heals the sick.

So we have journeyed through the process of becoming a leader of courage in a noble profession, whether that profession is officership or healthcare. What a journey! I have condensed more than four years of education and professional development into one hour. Finally, I’d like you to reflect on the following: What are your own core values? What are the attributes you want to develop? What is your life mission? Do you want to be a leader in your chosen profession? Will you develop your moral muscle and be a courageous ethical decision maker?

I leave you with a Jane Adams quote. She was a pioneer social worker, a feminist, an internationalist, and Nobel Peace prize winner. Jane Adams said, “Action indeed is the sole medium of expression for ethics.”

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak with you today.

## References

- Jones, T. (1991). Ethical decision making by individuals in organizations: An issue-contingent model. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 366-395.
- Livingston, J. (2005). *Debility and the moral imagination in Botswana* (African systems of thought). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Rest, J. (1994). Background: Theory and research, In J. Rest & D. Naravez (Eds.), *Moral development in the professions: Psychology and applied ethics*. (pp. 1-26). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, Inc.
- Stockdale, J. (1995). *Thoughts of a philosophical fighter pilot*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Press.