

The Insightful Leader Podcast Transcript

Now's the Time to Hone Your Moral Decision-Making Skills

Jessica LOVE: Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders in every sector have had to make EXTREMELY difficult decisions. If cuts are necessary, which employees should you let go? For essential businesses, is it ethical to expect people to come in to work if you can't give them all masks and gloves? And, is it OK to sacrifice time with your family or partner to focus on keeping your organization afloat? For leaders facing choices like these, business acumen alone isn't enough. Rather, your ability to work through moral dilemmas depends on a very different set of skills.

Brooke VUCKOVIC: Fitness for managing complexity when there isn't a right answer. Capacity to use moral imagination and see the viewpoints of other people.

LOVE: Brooke Vuckovic is a clinical professor at Kellogg who teaches a class on "moral complexity in leadership." And she says, if you want to really see how people make tough calls about what's right or wrong, how they think through complex, human problems, and how they can get it wrong, she recommends turning to fiction.

VUCKOVIC: I have long believed in the power of fiction to convey out the messy truths of who we are as human beings. Literature is far better suited to teach those lessons than any sanitized case study would be.

LOVE: That's because fiction gives the reader access to the inner lives of people, she says. And it allows you to learn about people who may *not* think like you do—from iron-fisted ancient kings, to servants who make unthinkable sacrifices, to heroes with a dark side.

VUCKOVIC: You have access to this very wide range of characters, of context, of motivations, of personality types. And it starts to create an empathy and a moral imagination for people who operate differently than you do, who process situations differently than you do, who might interpret your decision making in a very, very different way. You basically have the world at your fingertips the moment you are willing to engage with fiction and to learn how to extract lessons from it for you as a leader.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Welcome to *The Insightful Leader* from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Today on the podcast, we'll be exploring how to improve your moral decision-making skills. Brooke Vuckovic walks us through three works of literature that explore different aspects of morality in leadership. She'll share the lessons that these books and plays have to offer, and how they can challenge leaders to approach moral dilemmas more thoughtfully.

And one more thing: we recorded our interview with Vuckovic before the COVID-19 crisis began. So recently we followed up with her via video-call to talk more about the crisis.

VUCKOVIC: One of the things that we're seeing come into play right now is exactly this issue of, "How can we morally reason through what's right when you have the devil's choices?"

LOVE: You'll be hearing clips of both of these interviews throughout the episode.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: So to begin with: Why do well-meaning people often end up doing the wrong thing? Our first lesson comes from the play *Antigone*, written by Sophocles in 441 B.C. It's a Greek tragedy, so there's a chorus—a group of nameless people who show up intermittently, commenting on the action. A quick synopsis of the play: Antigone's brother has recently died and she wants to bury him. But due to past grievances, the king, Creon, won't let her. Yet Antigone decides to bury her brother anyway, in direct defiance of the king's orders. (Sorry for the spoilers, but it *is* two thousand years old.)

Anyway, the really interesting thing to Vuckovic is how Creon responds when his orders are defied. He's dead-set on punishing Antigone for ignoring the law. But throughout the play, all of these people come forward to warn Creon that punishing her will lead to disaster.

VUCKOVIC: And you see this with the chorus. You see this with Tiresias, a blind sage. You see this with his son. And he refuses to listen to them. Creon diminishes or belittles these people without much power who are bringing him the truth he needs to hear. And like any good tragedy, it ends with a lot of bloodshed and everyone dying, and him finally seeing the error of his ways. The primary lesson here is being mindful and aware of when pride can make us drown out the voice of others. And the question is how do you keep yourself from becoming a Creon?

LOVE: Vuckovic's answer: every leader *needs* to find their own chorus to serve as a voice of reason—a group of advisors with whom you can check in on thorny issues.

VUCKOVIC: So these individuals in our lives who are truth-tellers. A board of directors is a great example of a paid chorus, in this sense. And yet I find that executive teams often resist or chafe at their council when it disagrees with them. And I understand that. That is a frustrating situation—and that's what they're there for. So I think part of this is starting to see that friction as productive, and it making you sharper, versus it being something that is painful and getting in your way.

LOVE: In a crisis situation, it becomes especially critical to have that chorus to turn to, since lots of difficult decisions might need to be made quickly. And CEOs aren't the only ones who need this sounding board. Rank-and-file employees might as well. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis,

Vuckovic has seen leaders at some organizations creating a sort of “built-in” chorus, so that people aren’t left to make these kinds of decisions on their own in the heat of the moment.

VUCKOVIC: I think healthcare systems in particular are superstars in this regard. Johns Hopkins just put on a conference. And they were talking about how they have formed these coalitions of thinkers that include a doctor, a nurse, a hospital administrator, as well as an ethicist, to protect frontline physicians and frontline nurses from having to make terrible decisions regarding triage of equipment and care. Because when you're on those front lines, that capacity to morally reason gets compromised. You simply want to save what is in front of you. And looking at the structures that are being implemented to help people morally reason is incredibly heartening.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Many leaders feel a real sense of duty to their company or their clients. Maybe you feel it’s your job to make unsavory decisions for the good of your shareholders, for example. Or right now, maybe you feel obligated to put your family or your personal friendships on the backburner, so that you can devote all of your attention to solving the urgent problems your organization is facing. These dilemmas touch on the same question: How far are you willing to go in service of professional excellence?

This is one of the questions at the heart of *The Remains of the Day*, a novel by British author Kazuo Ishiguro. It’s written from the perspective of Stevens, an English butler in the 1920s and ‘30s who spends his career serving Lord Darlington.

VUCKOVIC: Stevens is a proper English Butler who spends a lot of time thinking about dignity and thinking about excellence in his profession. What does it mean to be an excellent butler?

LOVE: And the answer that Stevens comes up with might be familiar to a lot of us. Stevens concludes that if he wants to be an excellent butler, he must remain utterly devoted to his work and absolutely loyal to his employer, no matter what. This sense of unquestioning duty is his only moral code. And it requires him to make enormous sacrifices.

VUCKOVIC: He foregoes emotional connections with other people. He doesn't go to his father's bedside during his death because of an event that's taking place during that time. He cuts himself off from professional relationships. And he completely devotes his entire life to serving Lord Darlington well. Now the cruel turn is that Lord Darlington is not what Stevens had hoped he would be.

LOVE: For example, it eventually becomes clear that Darlington has Nazi sympathies, which Stevens chooses to overlook. So even though Stevens is upholding his duty at every step, he nonetheless ends up living a life he later regrets.

So how can you avoid falling into this same trap? This is where Vuckovic points out the difference between a moral code and moral *reasoning*. Sure, Stevens had a moral code: duty above all. Every time he faced a decision, he simply deferred to that code without really thinking about it. But he refused to morally reason.

VUCKOVIC: To think, “Do I really think that this is right? How might this be problematic that I'm doing this?” And that simplicity—he’s choosing the ease of saying, “I shouldn’t have curiosity in such matters.” And he’s putting that all on his employer, which is fine if things work out the way you hope they will. But when they don’t, how might you regret that lack of individual moral reasoning?

LOVE: Vuckovic argues that good leadership requires doing the hard work of thinking through the possible outcomes and then asking yourself, “Am I OK living with the consequences? *Should* my professional duty by my guiding light in this situation? When I look back on this, will I regret my decision?” In the context of COVID-19, for example, focusing only on solving the problems at hand could lead you to neglect the *people* you’re dealing with—something you’ll likely regret later.

VUCKOVIC: We are dealing with a human tragedy in this moment. Whether that is with lives or with livelihoods, it's been incredibly disruptive for people. They're under tremendous amount of strain and uncertainty. And job one for a leader—even when that devotion to excellence is paramount— job one is to demonstrate empathy and to also demonstrate vulnerability. And demonstrating empathy means taking a beat and connecting with people. “How is life for you right now?” And making sure to take that emotional temperature with individuals. It's critical to understand that and to give people that space to connect with you and to connect with one another.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Finally, when facing a moral dilemma, it’s tempting to fall back on the idea that you’re a “good person.” You might think about all the good things you’ve done in the past, and conclude, “Well, surely I’ll do the right thing again here!” But this can be a dangerous way to morally reason. We see why in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The novel tells the story of a teenager in Nigeria, and her father, Eugene.

VUCKOVIC: And Eugene is a devout Catholic. He is the publisher of *The Standard*, which is a paper that speaks truth to power. He runs the most successful and significant businesses in the town. And he beats his family mercilessly. So this story, we are looking at the divided self and how we can make sense of characters that may be seen as good by the external world but internally and to their families, they are not.

LOVE: To Vuckovic, the novel powerfully demonstrates that we can never just classify people as either “good” or “bad,” full stop. Because we all have traits that can lead us to do moral or immoral things. So Vuckovic’s advice for leaders...

VUCKOVIC: Be rigorously honest with yourself on what habits you have, what might get you into trouble with your character traits. So the desire to be powerful, for example, is a very common desire of leaders. And that can be a wonderful thing! It means you want to have broad influence for good on the world, for example. But that power can also have an underbelly if you're exerting it over other people in a very particular kind of way. So part of this is paying attention to your strengths and what you're known for, but also their shadow sides, what's underneath them. And I've said it before, I probably cannot say it enough to get beyond this idea of good people, bad people, and to really think about, how do we manage our own natures over time?

LOVE: *Purple Hibiscus* reminds us that our world isn't full of cartoon villains or perfect saints. It's full of complicated people responding to complicated circumstances. So just as we shouldn't blindly defer to some moral code, we also shouldn't blindly defer to our role models. We've all justified a decision by thinking, "Well, that's what So-And-So would have done!" But *Purple Hibiscus* shows how dangerous this can be.

VUCKOVIC: So Eugene in the story, for example, has just won an award for his work for social justice. And you start to think about, well, the splashy coverage that a lot of leaders get in popular press, you often are not getting the real truth of who these individuals are.

LOVE: When it comes to moral reasoning, Vuckovic sees the coronavirus crisis as a kind of trial by fire. Meaning, it's not only a test of a leader's moral foundations—it's also an opportunity for leaders to *build* that decision-making muscle. Because eventually this will pass, but there will be other crises, other problems, other dilemmas. So by carefully examining how you morally reason now—and adapting where you're falling short—you can come out of this more prepared for whatever moral quandary you face next.

VUCKOVIC: Moral capacity is only built by using it, by looking at it, by practicing it over time. If you are hoping for that moral reasoning capacity in crisis and you haven't worked on it all along, it won't be there.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: This episode of *The Insightful Leader* was written by Morgan Levey and Jake Smith. It was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone, and mixed by Michael Spikes. Special thanks to Brooke Vuckovic.

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