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Ethics lights the way to good government

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Clare Wiseman, Editor

“Everybody’s Doing It”: Peer Identification and its Effect on Ethical Behavior

By
Alex Kipp

So, here’s an interesting idea: what if our sense of right and wrong isn’t fixed? What if, instead, it’s fluid? And what if our decisions aren’t just driven by the drive to maximize the best outcomes for ourselves? What if, instead, sometimes our choices are influenced more by groups to which we belong, or wished we belonged to?

These are just a couple of the questions contemplated by a UPenn researcher named Eugen Dimant in his paper, “On Peer Effects: Behavioral Contagion of (Un)Ethical Behavior and the Role of Social Identity.” I highly recommend it. It’s about a hundred pages, but well worth the slog. Mr. Dimant works in Behavioral Economics, a field that seeks to predict why people make the choices they do, but with more accuracy than traditional economics has. Behavioral Economics proposes that the motivations for many of our choices are fluid, context-specific, and socially influenced.

Mr. Dimant’s paper focused on two questions: does observing un/ethical behavior in one’s environs have an effect on one’s own “ethicality” and does the observer’s social identification with the people observed increase or decrease that effect? In other words, are you more or less likely to misbehave if your friends are misbehaving, too?

The answer, he finds, is a big yes. Interestingly, it’s not enough just to observe unethical behavior in someone else for the behavior to be generally contagious. That someone else has to be someone you share an identity with, someone whose approval you’d seek and whose scorn you’d try to avoid. At one point, the author uses gravity as an analogy: the closer people are together in a so-called “social space,” the more likely they are to influence each other’s behavior either positively or negatively. This seems to make some anecdotal sense, at least to me: I took a lot of math in high school certainly not because I liked math, but because a lot of smart people took a lot of math and I wanted to be like them. Math class was a sort of a “nerd clubhouse.”

Further, it turns out that these effects seem to function more strongly when we observe our peers acting unethically, rather than ethically. There could be different reasons for that. One could argue, for example, that it’s easier to be swayed to be permissive to oneself than it is to be more restrictive (a thought I am constantly reminded of when I think of my lunch options…)

So, what do we do with such knowledge? Should we make people complete questionnaires before assigning their duty stations, so that we are only grouping the most dissimilar people together in each office? Sounds impractical. And would that even solve our problem? If we’re lucky, the longer we stay at a job, the more likely we are to start thinking of at least some of our co-workers as peers with whom we identify socially. Take my office for example: when I started here years ago, I would’ve never dreamed of inviting any of my colleagues to any party where I expected to have any amount of fun. That’s no longer true. (You could ask, cynically, if it was just my definition of “fun” that changed over time, but we’ll save that for a different day.)

If well-functioning units or offices tend to create peer social identities between colleagues, how do we prevent unethical contagion problems? One way might be rotating duty assignments. This is not unheard of, for example, in anti-corruption agencies, where the staff of an Inspector General’s Office overseeing one agency might rotate to overseeing another agency every few years. But that seems like a high price to pay for a lot of agencies and people. What if I work in a Brooklyn office, not so far from my home, and now, to prevent me from getting too chummy with my colleagues, I get reassigned to a Bronx office? That’s gonna be a BIG morale problem (for the commute time, not because it’s the Bronx).

What about shifting responsibilities within an organization/location? If a workplace could be organized into task-oriented teams, then perhaps members could shift in and out of those teams, learning new skills with new people every so often. (Not so sure how unions and civil service laws would look at this.) Shifting teams and tasks periodically might provide added dividends in terms of retention, as staff is constantly adding to its skill set.

For example: in a given restaurant you might have five different task-oriented teams - wait staff and front of house, dishes and bussing, the bar, the kitchen, and accounting. Each team can get cohesive pretty quickly, which is a good thing for a team. But sometimes group priorities can diverge from organizational priorities, especially if the group is suffering from peer-induced unethical contagion. To help individuals better understand and align with the objectives of the whole restaurant, and not just their team, staff members could be trained to handle the tasks of any team, so they can be rotated in and out on a somewhat regular basis.

Now there are a lot of questions to this approach: will it take more time and money to cross-train staff? Probably. Is it possible to cross-train staff in every office for every job? Probably not. Is ethical contagion something we need to proactively avoid, or is it something to address as we see it? I have no idea. But they are questions worth asking if we're interested in fostering a culture of ethics and excellence at our agencies. For more information, check out Mr. Dimant's paper in full: http://bit.ly/1ROmVfg

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Recent Enforcement Cases

►DOE Teacher paid $1,000 fine for giving a business card relating to her private music business to the parent of one of her DOE students. The business card had her personal website and email address as well as the address of her DOE school and her DOE email address. The City's conflicts of interest law prohibits a public servant from using or attempting to use her position as a public servant to obtain any financial benefit for herself, and from using her City email address, a City resource, on business cards for her outside business.

►ACS Child Protective Specialist Supervisor II will serve an eight-workday suspension, valued at $2,469, for using her City position to intervene in an ACS investigation involving her adult child. The City's conflicts of interest law prohibits a public servant from using or attempting to use her position as a public servant to obtain any private advantage for herself or an associated person, such as a child.

►ACS Child Protective Specialist Supervisor II served a five-workday suspension, valued at $1,577, for using her ACS email account and computer during her City workday for her private business. The City's conflicts of interest law prohibits City employees from using City time or City resources to perform work for their private businesses.

►The Board issued a public warning letter to a Member of Manhattan Community Board No. 2 ("CB 2") who self-reported to the Board that she had appeared in her private capacity as an architect on behalf of a paying client during a meeting of CB 2's Landmarks Committee. The City's conflicts of interest law prohibits community board members from making compensated appearances before their own community boards on behalf of private interests. In deciding to issue a public warning letter instead of imposing a fine, the Board took into consideration that the Member self-reported her conduct to the Board and, prior to appearing before CB 2, received advice from the CB2 Chair that she was permitted to appear so as long as she recused herself from voting on the matter, which she did.

►DHS employee accepted a fifteen-day pay fine, valued at $3,152, and a six-month probationary period for misusing the DHS email system during her City work hours to solicit DHS employees to shop at her travel website. The City's conflicts of interest law prohibits City employees from using City time or City resources to perform work for their private businesses.

Congratulations! to the winner of the Conflict of Interest Board's March Public Service Puzzler contest:

Joseph Gallagher**,** an Assistant Commissioner of Emergency Planning and Coordination at DoITT.

Look for Mr. Gallagher's bio in the April Public Service Puzzler coming out later this month.

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Interested in more information? Get in touch with COIB's Training & Education Unit to arrange a class in Chapter 68 for you and your staff. Contact Alex ***Kipp, Director of Training,*** *at* ***kipp@coib.nyc.gov***

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