



Rising to Leadership Responsibility: Insights from Navigating the Bind of Necessary Evils

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HARVARD | BUSINESS | SCHOOL
100 YEARS
1908-2008

Four Voices of Experience

“It feels like the stress you have when you know you’re going into your final exam in college, and you know you haven’t prepared one bit. And so you’re going in there and whatever anxiety or panic that’s running through you—whether it’s a slight tremble or it’s an ‘Oh my God, I’m going to get an F and I know I’m going to get an F and there’s nothing I’m gonna do or say to get out of this’—you know the deed is the deed, and I know how it is going to end, and it’s going to end horribly and there is nothing I can do about it .”

“I was probably in the bathroom several times just feeling incredibly sick to my stomach. Thinking, ‘I can’t believe I have to do this.’”

“It’s definitely not a comfortable feeling. Knots in the stomach. . . . So it’s almost like I’m in the barrel and I know I’m going over the waterfall. There’s nothing you can do. You’ve lost that control now.”

“It’s like holding a Magnum .44 up to someone’s head, pulling the trigger, and leaving them for dead on the street. That’s what it feels like.”

Agenda

1. **The Challenge**
2. **The Questions**
 - Practical & Pedagogical
 - Research
3. **Necessary Evils as a Window**
 - Findings
 - Emergent Theory
4. **Addressing (if not answering) the Questions**

The Challenge: The Responsibility Gap

Responsibilities pressed upon those in a position to exercise leadership
often outstrip their existing capacity to respond.

Web of Responsibilities

- Expansive
- Inconsistent
- Intensifying



Capacity to Respond

- Human tendencies and limitations
- Station of actor

One Manifestation

“We’re trained as businessmen. . .but we’re being asked to pass judgment on the moral and ethical value of these projects.”

**David Komansky, Chairman, Merrill Lynch
commenting on China’s Three Gorges Dam
2002 World Economic Forum**

The Question: How to Rise to Responsibility

How to shoulder a web of diverse (and often divergent) responsibilities when it is both most essential and most difficult to do so.

Practical & Pedagogical Questions

Acute Instances (“responsibility tests”):

How to equip yourself to be one of the 37% in the Milgram experiment who did not administer the maximum shock. (episodic)

Professional Growth:

You do not wake up one morning to find you are Jim Burke, CEO of Johnson & Johnson. . . So how equip yourself over time? (longitudinal)

Research Questions

How do people experience acute collisions of responsibility?

How do people navigate those collisions?

Necessary Evils

Tasks in which a person must knowingly and intentionally cause emotional, physical, or material harm to another human being in the service of achieving some perceived greater good or purpose.

The Bind

Dueling Responsibilities

- fulfill professional responsibility
- advance greater good
- do no harm

Competing Psychological Forces

- obedience
- empathy

Navigating It

Prior Research

- focus on targeted person
- decency and dignity
 - crucial (instrumental, ethical)
 - rare

Impoverished Response Tendencies

- retreat (self-protection)
 - exit
 - disengagement / detachment
- depersonalization (callous, automated)

Necessary Evils

Occupational Setting	Number of Participants (Episodes)	Examples
Management	44 (90)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Layoffs •Firings •Contract terminations •Performance reviews •Disciplining
Medicine	25 (58)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Medical procedures •Delivering bad news
Police Work	22 (49)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Evictions •Warrants •Repossessions
Addiction Counseling	20 (33)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Behavior modification discipline •Expulsions

Necessary Evils: Findings

1. **Engagement**: Those who performed necessary evils often engaged psychologically.
2. **Personalization**: Those who performed necessary evils often customized their treatment of the targeted person in creative ways.
3. **Response Styles**: Four distinct combinations of how people respond to their own experience of necessary evils and how they respond to the targets of these tasks.

Necessary Evils: Findings

1. Those who performed necessary evils often engaged psychologically.

Psychological Engagement

- a) **Connecting with one's own emotional experience of doing the task**
- b) **Attuning oneself to the target's experience, especially the human toll**
- c) **Embracing one's own humanity**
 - **Explicitly affirming one's own humanity**
 - **Integrating own private, personal experience into an understanding of one's role**

Psychological Disengagement

- a) **Absence of or disconnection from one's own emotional experience of doing the task**
- b) **Dissociating from the target's experience (dehumanizing target or minimizing its toll)**
- c) **Subjugating own humanity**
 - **Explicitly displacing self with role**

Psychological Engagement

“You **feel compassion** because *you see the facial expressions. You see the physical reaction. . . You can't help but think about the kids, the car payment, the rent.*” [manager 9]

dimension 1:
connecting with own emotion

dimension 2:
attuning to experience of & impact on target

“It was one of those things where I said [to myself], ‘Gosh, maybe I could just let them stay at my house for a couple of days.’ It’s a thought that runs through your mind that **let’s you know that you are still human and you have not totally blocked out the things that you should be sensitive to as a human being.**” [officer 14]

dimension 3:
embracing
own humanity

Necessary Evils: Findings

1. **Engagement**: Those who performed necessary evils often engaged psychologically
2. **Personalization**: Those who performed necessary evils often customized their treatment of the targeted person in creative ways
 - Exercised personal effort to shape sensitive interpersonal treatment to fit the situation or reflect own touch
 - Improvised
 - Independent of, or even in conflict with, mandated routines and norms

Personalization: Some Examples

Doctors

- Working out of the field of vision of patient
- Getting father to sing to young son

Counselors

- Options and opportunities
- “Calm and nurturing” approach to behavior modification

Managers

- Accompanying a fired employee out of the building (vs. security)
- Helping a laid-off employee find temporary housing

Officers

- Food and water
- Time and support:

“I am glad I took the time to talk to them. It was after, the eviction was complete, they were outside, I spent ten minutes talking to them. Giving them what I thought was good advice, not that they would take it or anything. They needed a hug. That is what I was doing. Talking to them. A verbal hug.” [officer 3]

Necessary Evils: Findings

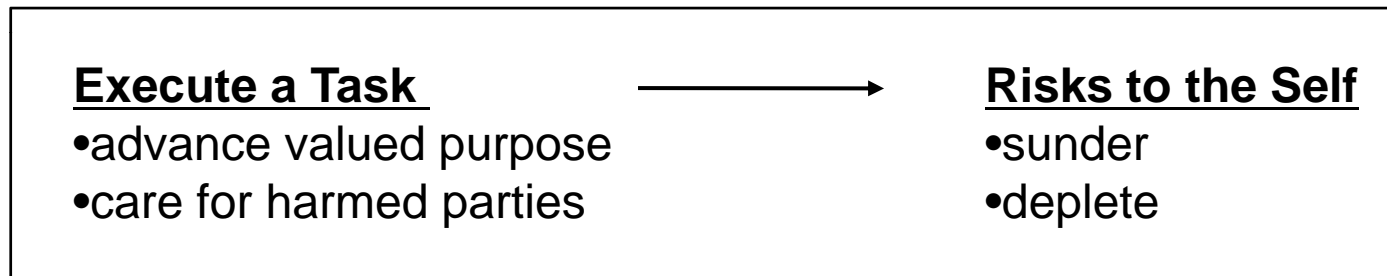
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A Typology of Response Styles

Response To Own Subjective Experience	Response To Target	
	Personalized	Non-Personalized
Psychologically Engaged	<p><i>Integrated</i> Performer engages with own subjective experience and incorporates engagement into personalized treatment of victim.</p>	<p><i>Guarded</i> Performer engages with own subjective experience but does not incorporate it into interpersonally sensitive response, which is standardized, rather than personalized.</p>
Psychologically Disengaged	<p><i>Detached Concern</i> Performer disengages from own subjective experience but still produces personalized interpersonal sensitivity.</p>	<p><i>Mechanical</i> Performer disengages from own subjective experience and produces standardized, rather than personalized, interpersonal sensitivity.</p>

The Questions Revisited: How to Navigate the Bind?

Web of Responsibilities ← **GAP** → Capacity to Respond



↓

Self-Maintenance
(parry the blow)

Reduce the Burden

- Shrink the situation
- Shrink the self

↓

Self-Generation
(use raw material)

Use the Situation

- Fuel creative action
- Construct integrity

The Question Revisited: How to Equip People to Rise to Responsibility?

- 1. Leadership = creatively navigating irresolvable collisions of responsibility**
 - Weather the unwieldy experience
 - Embrace thoughts and emotions rather than regulate them away
 - Operate and construct creative action within the situation rather than deflect or defer to its force

- 2. Moral choreography**
 - Mishaps → Moves
 - Constraints → Endeavors within constraints

Thank you.