SIX STAGES OF MORAL REASONING

For many years, Lawrence Kohlberg conducted carefully controlled research on the moral development of children. He and his colleagues at the Harvard Center for the Study of Moral Development would ask children of varying ages to respond to situations which entailed right and wrong behavior. They would ask, for example, what the child would do if another child took his or her toy. If someone asked him or her to misbehave in some way, how would he or she respond? Why would he or she refrain from hitting another child?

The researchers would determine what reasons they would use to make these moral decisions. What was their ethical system?

On the basis of thousands of responses, Kohlberg was able to identify six stages typical of moral development in children as they mature. The first two stages he called the pre-conventional levels, the second two stages the conventional levels, and the third two stages the post-conventional or principled levels. His work was informed by Piaget's earlier study of cognitive development in children and is similar in that both researchers discovered that developmental stages, both of cognition in general and moral development in particular, proceed from the concrete to the abstract.

A major implication of Kohlberg's work is that if specific stages of development can be identified, procedures might be generated to help people progress through the stages, moving toward moral maturity. His later work on the moral development of prisoners confirmed much of this belief and has helped point the way to improved practices in correctional education. Our point in learning about the stages is to identify a model of moral development, evaluate responses to a moral dilemma in terms of the model, then utilize the model to help us become increasingly mature in our moral responses, developing a functional ethical system.

The following descriptions are an attempt to define each of the six stages in terms which can be useful in an understanding of ethics in the world of work:

Pre-Conventional Level

At this level, the individual is basically responsive to the idea of good or bad but interprets situations in terms of simple reward and punishment or the exchange of favors.

a. Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment.

Avoidance of punishment, doing something because it feels good, and submission to power are seen as good in their own right, not with respect to any moral order.

b. Stage 2: The Marketplace.

Right behavior is that which satisfies one's own needs. Reciprocity, fairness, and sharing are present but always interpreted in a highly practical, immediate way: "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." Justice and loyalty are not parts of this stage.

Conventional Level.

Right behavior is seen as living up to expectations of family or nation, as conformity to personal expectations and to the social order. It includes clear loyalty to the social order and identifying with the persons or groups that represent it.

Stage 3: Good Boy-Nice Girl.

Approval by others characterizes good behavior at this stage. Conformity to stereotypes is typical here, and behavior is frequently judged by intention. *He meant well* is important, and one earns approval by being *nice*.

Stage 4: Law and Order.

Morally correct behavior at this stage consists of showing respect for authority, doing one's duty, utilizing fixed rules, and maintaining the social order for its own sake.

Post-Conventional or Principled Level.

Stage 5: The Social Contract.

Right action is defined in terms of general individual rights and standards which have been agreed upon by society. Right is a matter of personal opinion and values, especially in the context of procedural rules for reaching consensus. Relativism of personal values and opinions is accepted. The legal point of view is important, but the possibility always exists of changing laws to move toward increasing rationality and social usefulness.

Stage 6: The Universal Ethical Principle

This stage is based on respect for the dignity of human beings as individuals. Right behavior proceeds from self-appropriated ethical principles. The principles are highly abstract, such as the Golden Rule, not concrete, like the Ten Commandments.