

Overview of “The Moral Leader”

“THE MORAL LEADER” COURSE

Welcome to “The Moral Leader,” a course that has intrigued and enriched thousands of students since it was first offered in the 1980s as an elective at the Harvard Business School. In class, students debate morally challenging situations that arise from reading and thinking through powerful novels, plays, short stories, and historical accounts; these are international in scope, illuminating timeless tests of moral decision-making and leadership. The aim of this literature-based course is to develop your ability to identify, describe, and analyze moral problems, and to think clearly about how to act in consequence.

The readings for the course, previewed in this book, are arranged in a flow of thirteen sessions, divided into three modules – Moral Challenge, Moral Reasoning, and Moral Leadership – that move us through an exploration of the topic of moral leadership. The flow highlights a succession of questions that constitute the thrust of the course: *What is the nature of a moral challenge? How do people “reason morally”? What do these look like when they are undertaken by leaders – individuals who must make decisions under conditions of responsibility for others? How is moral leadership different from any other kind?*

While philosophical in form, these are intensely practical questions, born of our desire to make good, morally satisfying decisions when we are in leadership roles. Our ability to grapple with them, alone and with others, is a step on the road to moral action.

The reading list for the course draws on fictional and historical accounts set in the US, Great Britain, Nigeria, Japan, Thailand, Greece, Antarctica, and Italy. You will read about challenges people faced more than two thousand years ago and as recently as September 11, 2001, in times of war, and of peace, and in unsettling periods in between. The varied settings, times, and situations reinforce the universality of moral challenge and the requirement for leaders to develop their abilities to describe and analyze moral problems, to think them through, and to act.

As you will discover, the literary and historical material will allow us to examine moral action through the lens of others’ moral challenges and subsequent choices.

Table 1.1 The “Moral Leader” readings

Reading	Setting	Format
Module I: Moral Challenge		
<i>Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage</i> Alfred Lansing	Antarctica, 1914	Historical account
<i>Antigone</i> Sophocles	Ancient Greece	Play
<i>Blessed Assurance</i> Allan Gurganus	1940s America	Novella
<i>Things Fall Apart</i> Chinua Achebe	Early twentieth-century Nigeria	Novel
Module II: Moral Reasoning		
<i>Trifles</i> Susan Glaspell	Rural America, early twentieth century	Play
<i>Principles of Biomedical Ethics</i> Tom L. Beauchamp, James F. Childress		Text excerpts
<i>The Sweet Hereafter</i> Russell Banks	Contemporary America	Novel
<i>The Remains of the Day</i> Kazuo Ishiguro	Britain between world wars	Novel
<i>A Man for All Seasons</i> Robert Bolt	Sixteenth-century England	Play and movie
Module III: Moral Leadership		
<i>The Prince</i> Niccolò Machiavelli	Sixteenth-century Italy	Treatise
<i>The Secret Sharer</i> Joseph Conrad	1890s off the coast of Siam	Short story
<i>Truman and the Bomb</i> <i>Just and Unjust Wars</i> Michael Walzer	World War II, beyond	Text excerpts
<i>Personal History</i> Katharine Graham	1970s America, recalled	Autobiography
<i>A Good Life</i> Ben Bradlee		Autobiography
<i>American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center</i> William Langewiesche	Post-September 11th USA	Eyewitness account

Unlike a case-based discussion, we see beyond a “what would you do” situation to realize the consequences of decisions that protagonists actually make; this perspective on cause and effect, on action and impact, takes us from speculation of what *might* happen to a consideration of what *did* happen and why.

The classes thus provide a laboratory for understanding how morally charged situations develop and are shaped through choices, and the results they produce. The opportunity to see a situation all the way through this process is essential to understanding how to anticipate the effects of moral leadership. It also provides us, in the classroom, with the opportunity to refine, validate, or revise our own thinking about moral assessment and our determination of action as potential leaders.

AN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING MORAL LEADERSHIP

What is it about “The Moral Leader” course that is so compelling? Why have so many students participated in it year after year? And why has it attracted a series of dedicated instructors who have at once personalized the curriculum but kept its basic approach intact? Many answers to these questions come from your fellow students, those who have taken the course at the Harvard Business School and are eager to share their views with you,¹ and are combined with my own reflections.

Prior to becoming a faculty member at HBS, I spent twenty-five years as a senior executive, doing the hard work of improving corporate and organizational performance and witnessing first-hand the complexities of leadership, particularly when moral issues are at stake. In redesigning the course, which I’ve now taught nine times, I’ve brought that corporate experience into the equation in order to have you focus intently on the practical aspects that come from “The Moral Leader” approach to learning.

So in the next sections you will hear from your fellow students and from me. We are all encouraging you on!

Why study moral leadership?

The student responses are in italics.

- *In some way I will characterize “The Moral Leader” as a Renaissance class – one that is made to expand your perception of the world and of yourself in a broad but very tangible direction. It covers issues (1) that are inevitable for us to face in some shape or form, (2) whose outcomes could be very important in our lives, causing great amounts of either joy or grief, and (3) for which normally we do not tend to think ahead of time, making us fairly unprepared when we encounter them.*
- *Thus, if you want to learn about the issues of power which tend to compromise multiple moral issues, or whether preconceived strong moral rigidity is the right format in which to address delicate moral issues, or what morality really is, this is a course for you.*

Looking back on my years of corporate life, I know that many things happen that cannot be anticipated. But the need to make decisions in situations in which ethical or moral questions arise is as certain as the sun rising and setting, baked into the conflicts of serving constituencies with different interests and into the endless temptations of a measurement-based life.

In my experience, organizations offer few (if any) venues in which such concepts can be discovered, challenged, and refined. Yet you may worry – and rightly so – that you will face situations with moral and ethical stakes and that you will be unprepared for such moments, left to rely on gut feel and instinct.

“The Moral Leader” approach can help you in your struggle to define your own notions of morality, moral action, and moral leadership. The course provides a place where you can think out loud (and on paper) about the challenges of leading while contending with moral problems, and you will have some stunning examples to learn from (both positive and negative).

Practicing moral decision-making

- *Morality is not something that can be switched on like a light when you assume a leadership role. Taking the time mentally to flex your morality muscle in the relative security of a classroom gives you a sense of your individual stance on moral issues before you are leading others and making moral judgments that impact more than just yourself. Ultimately, how we will each react in a morally challenging situation is something we shan't be able to predict until the moment comes, but this class is a step towards taking every possible preparation to ensure that when faced with a challenge we will have some experience to draw upon – even if it is through the lessons of our protagonists.*

One advantage of “The Moral Leader” approach is the way its readings and debates replicate the kind of involvement in the life of others that is the stuff of organizational existence: The fast friendships, long-standing enmities, close connections, unavoidable rivalries, and dependence on others that characterize a lifetime spent in organizations. No one succeeds (for long) in organizations who is not good at “reading” others, but learning how to read another person is very hard to teach. Literature is good at this – it’s what it is for.

Learning through literature

- *The study of literary and historical leaders does indeed question, confront and challenge preconceived notions about moral reasoning, moral challenge and moral leadership. You'll be surprised at how much impact the study of such characters will have on your own thought processes.*
- *This course does not take you through moral challenges in the business context. Although the Ken Lay/Enron analogies will strike you throughout the course, you will not actually be studying corporate fraud and malfeasance.*

I have come to believe that the course is intense, powerful, and practical precisely because it does *not* focus solely on problems situated in contemporary organizations. Instead, the readings take us far and wide, back thousands of years, and deep into other cultures. Effective leadership requires intimacy and breadth, the ability to connect oneself to oneself and to connect to others. This is a lifelong search with boundaries that stretch well beyond any particular organization or assignment, well beyond, in fact, the professional careers that any of us pursue. A course like "The Moral Leader" allows us to develop self-awareness and a hunger to understand the broader world we live in. The curiosity and self-knowledge we gain is a powerful combination, one I believe will serve you well in *all* the roles you will play.

Engaging in moral debate

- *Be prepared to be uncomfortable in discussing certain issues like race, religion, culture (yours and others'), but also be willing to contribute to the discussion, even where you know your view will be vastly different from others (as long as you're respectful). It's hard to be a mere participant in this class and learn at the same time – you have to be willing to test your thoughts and ideas, have them challenged quite forcefully and either defend yourself or concede a change of mind.*

Another advantage of "The Moral Leader" is having the chance to experience your real (perhaps better or even best) self in the presence of others, experiencing what it feels like to say what you are thinking, to struggle to put your thoughts into words, to take risks on ideas that are half-formed, or cynical, or exploratory. These, too, are necessary skills for individuals who work in organizations – the ability to locate yourself through thoughts and words, and to take risks to say things that others may not want to hear, or might disagree with profoundly. A topic like moral leadership invites such a search for authenticity, and you will find yourself working hard, very hard, to describe your ideas and to react, real-time, to the ideas of others.

Confronting differences

- *My primary suggestion would be to come into the class discussion with a completely open mind since sticking to your initial thinking can limit your learning. I have found that in prior discussions I have come in with one conclusion on the reading and have left with a completely different one. It's easy in a class like this to have preconceived notions, so you must work hard to let new ideas in.*

"The Moral Leader" will expose you to the many ways in which even smart, well-intentioned, articulate individuals can differ from each other. Organizational life and leadership require the ability to search for common ground on a wide variety of topics. Yet each of us pursues this search in the (sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious) belief that our ideas can't really be that different from others', that the assumptions and reasoning processes of others are more or less like our own.

In “The Moral Leader,” you will see how differently your classmates think about notions that to you seem obvious and self-evident. In addition, you will be exposed to characters and situations that force you well outside of yourself – that require you to enter into worlds that are vastly different from your own. Both of these facets of the course will prepare you, better than you might have been, to navigate the differences in worldview and opinion that await you in your professional (and personal) life.

USING THIS TEXT

This textbook has been created to enhance your participation in “The Moral Leader.”

The following chapter, a “Guide to Literature-based Learning,” describes approaches that have proved effective in reading and analyzing the materials and in preparing for class sessions. It also features additional advice from students on their own techniques for study and class participation.

The three main topics of the course – Moral Challenge, Moral Reasoning, Moral Leadership – are then examined. Each begins with a module map – a one-page capsule view of major module themes and readings. There is also a module preview, a brief look at some of the ways the topics have been considered by, for example, philosophers, social and natural scientists, and researchers on leadership.

Each class session is focused on a specific literary text or historical account and has its own dedicated chapter, designed to aid your preparation and to enrich your analysis. The chapters include:

- a selected quote (or series of quotes) from the text that takes you into the heart of the story, situation, or characters we will focus on;
- an overview of themes and questions posed by the text;
- assignment questions;
- historical background, illuminating the context of the reading and the situation;
- author biographies.

A few of the readings are included in an appendix to this textbook, but most are assigned as individual texts. The textbook closes with an annotated bibliography of additional readings on moral leadership.

NOTES

- 1 Students participating in “The Moral Leader” in Fall 2006 responded to an email survey that invited them to share their perspectives on the course with future students. With candor, thoughtfulness, and generosity, they responded to two questions: (1) In introducing “The Moral Leader” to other students, what would you have wanted to know about the course before you began it? (2) In thinking about how to prepare for class and how to participate productively in it, what thoughts, advice, and suggestions would you share with future students of “The Moral Leader”? The excerpts included are verbatim.