Ethical Principles in *Doubt*

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The Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Educational Doctorate Program offers doctoral candidates opportunities to learn about leadership. Students study many facets of leadership, one being ethics. While learning about ethics in leadership, first year students form groups of five or less and watch a movie rich with ethical dilemmas. To satisfy this requirement, the author viewed the film, *Doubt* (Rudin & Shanley, 2008) with four classmates. After viewing this film, the group discussed the movie in reference to three main themes. First, the group identified the important ethical principles portrayed in the film. Next, the group analyzed and evaluated how the characters responded to these issues. Finally, the group noted the ethical implications from the movie.

A quick synopsis finds the film’s story centering on the main character, Sister Aloysius, principal of Saint Nicholas Catholic School. She is a strict disciplinarian who is feared by her students. Her old fashioned, conservative ways clash with the progressive, popular parish priest, Father Flynn. Sister Aloysius’ extreme dislike of Father Flynn finds her stirring distrust of him among the other sisters of the parish. This causes the sisters to look for faults in Father Flynn at every turn. When Sister Aloysius hears that Father Flynn takes special interest in a boy, she jumps at the chance to accuse him of inappropriate behavior but, does not have proof (*Doubt* Rudin & Shanley, 2008).

**Important Ethical Principles**

Sister Aloysius feels that Father Flynn acts inappropriately with a twelve-year-old boy. When she senses this is happening, she goes to great lengths to force Father Flynn to leave the parish. Her actions and behaviors are not Christian-like. Her justification for her actions is that she is protecting this boy and, subsequently, all boys in the parish. Sister Aloysius is acting from
Kant’s Categorical Imperative. She is doing what is right no matter what the cost (Johnson, 2012).

Conversely, when Father Flynn is unjustly accused of an inappropriate relationship he chooses to do nothing. It is Sister Aloysius’ inappropriate actions that give Father Flynn every right to discipline, or even fire, her. However, instead of taking any of these actions, Father Flynn tries to reason with Sister Aloysius. When he realizes this is to no avail, he resigns from the parish. Father Flynn is acting from Utilitarianism. He is doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Johnson, 2012).

**How The Characters Respond To These Issues**

To be more specific with the important ethical principles portrayed in the film, Sister Aloysius dislikes Father Flynn because he is different from her. This dislike is so strong that she steps away from God and acts unChristian-like by planting the seed of doubt about Father Flynn in the other sisters. Sister James, the eighth grade teacher influenced by her leader’s words, reports an accusation that is merely an insinuation; she has little to no proof of this accusation. The accusation is of an inappropriate relationship between Father Flynn and a twelve-year-old boy. Sister Aloysius uses this accusation, however weak it is, as an opportunity to get rid of Father Flynn. When Sister Aloysius senses this desired outcome is not happening quickly enough, she presses further by speaking to the boy’s mother. This is done in hopes that the mother will complain about Father Flynn since Sister Aloysius lacks evidence. Then, Sister Aloysius lies to Father Flynn about speaking to a nun at his former parish and insinuates his inappropriateness, in some way, at this previous place of employment.

Sister Aloysius does not just step away from God and act unChristian-like, she acts unethically. She treats someone differently because she does not like him. She takes this a step
further and elicits others not to like this person, as well. She makes a false accusation against the person she does not like about a crime in which she has no proof. She goes yet another step further, trying to convince the mother that a crime is occurring while again, possessing no proof. Finally, she tells a terrible lie to Father Flynn that forces him to resign and leave the parish. Sister Aloysius, acting out of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, does what she feels is right no matter what the cost (Johnson, 2012). For she feels that achieving her goal of forcing Father Flynn to resign, protects the boys of the school even if she has to act unChristian-like or unethically.

Father Flynn is confronted by Sister Aloysius about an inappropriate relationship with a boy but she has no proof. Sister Aloysius, who is Father Flynn’s subordinate, does not act within proper protocol when dispensing her allegation. Father Flynn, as her boss, is within his rights to speak to her regarding these transgressions. When he does not, one might say he is condoning Sister Aloysius’ inappropriate actions. Father Flynn could report her behavior to the Monsignor. In light of Father Flynn’s options, his ultimate course of action is to resign from the parish. Due to the lack of evidence against him and the improper way Sister Aloysius conducts herself, Father Flynn’s resignation appears to be an admission of guilt.

However, before coming to this conclusion one must consider the alternatives. Father Flynn tries to reason with Sister Aloysius but soon realizes this is futile. Father Flynn knows that if he reports this to the Monsignor, everyone will come under scrutiny as Sister Aloysius will stop at nothing to prove her allegation. Father Flynn has the foresight to know that this type of fight will only harm the parish. In contrast to Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn is truly acting Christian-like by sacrificing himself in order to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Thus, he is practicing Utilitarianism (Johnson, 2012).
Ethical Implications

Sister Aloysius decides on a course of action because she does not like someone who is different from her. Her course of action goes against proper protocol and her vows as a nun in the Catholic Church. While it is commendable that someone fights for what she feels is right no matter what the cost, Kant’s Categorical Imperative (Johnson, 2012), Sister Aloysius does not have evidence to support her accusation. Thus, she makes a decision out of emotion. Leaders should not make decisions out of emotion as this is unethical.

While Sister Aloysius’ influence on Sister James is covert, Sister Aloysius overtly tries to manipulate the boy’s mother. In both cases, Sister Aloysius takes action. In either case, leaders need to be cognizant of the influence they have on subordinates. Given the right situation, a person could be manipulated. Leaders should not use their power to influence, or manipulate, subordinates or others. This kind of behavior is unethical.

Father Flynn takes a different approach. He encounters a subordinate who acts inappropriately. He chooses to do nothing about this inappropriate behavior even though he has the power to discipline or fire her. This is in stark contrast to Sister Aloysius’ actions. Ethically and morally one might say Father Flynn should fight Sister Aloysius’ allegation. Others might say that Father Flynn, by sacrificing himself for the greater good, is practicing Utilitarianism (Johnson, 2012). If he truly is innocent and this is his justification, he is a great leader. Great leaders act ethically even in the toughest of situations.

Conclusion

Doubt (Rudin & Shanley, 2008) is a religious movie that is rich with ethical dilemmas. As a leader, is it ethical to treat someone differently just because he/she lives his/her life differently? Is it ethical to influence followers by planting negative thoughts about another
follower or a superior? Is it ethical to accuse someone of inappropriate action without evidence? If a leader is accused of wrongdoing by a subordinate but that subordinate is breaking the rules to make the accusation, is the leader acting unethically by not addressing the subordinate?

With respect to Sister Aloysius and her ethical decision making, the author can only draw from his experience as a leader in the education field. The author works with people who are unlike him. He is not friends with everybody in his place of employment. However, the author does not let personal feelings interfere with his job performance. The author treats everybody professionally. This also means he does not gossip or plant seeds of “doubt” about anybody, especially the employees who are unlike him. When the author has to work with staff or students who go against the rules, regulations, policies, or procedures, he has to have evidence of these transgressions. The author is not allowed to base his judgment on a “feeling.”

With respect to Father Flynn’s ethical decision making, he decides not to take any action. Father Flynn is given sufficient reason to recommend disciplinary action, including dismissal, for Sister Aloysius. However the author, analyzing the many different repercussions of both action and inaction by Father Flynn, understands why Father Flynn chooses to resign from the parish.

Sister Aloysius acts without merit whereas Father Flynn does not act but has merit. Just as with Sister Aloysius, some people are going to be so strong in their convictions that no mountain of evidence, or lack thereof, is going to make them believe otherwise. In Father Flynn’s case, one might feel a person should take action and then is left wondering why that person did nothing. Thus, the author concludes that what might be a moral and ethical value to some might not be to others. While some are willing to risk everything to prove a point, some will not risk anything, even if they are right. The enigma about an ethical issue is that oftentimes there is no clear cut right or wrong answer.
References
