THE COURAGE OF ONE'S CONVICTIONS

by
paula mirk

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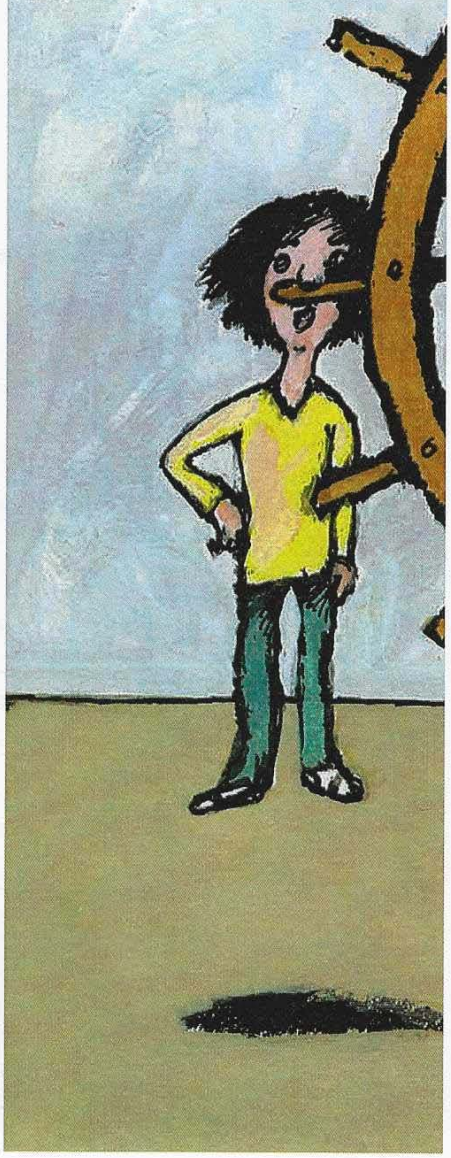
As headmistress of an independent secondary school, Sara was no stranger to the ethical decision-making that often accompanies student disciplinary actions. One of her most challenging dilemmas surfaced unexpectedly one morning, as such challenges often do.

Due to escalating hallway problems the previous spring and increasing concerns from parents, Sara's school trustees had recently put a strong policy in place to respond to fighting. So when three students were brought to her office after a scuffle in the cafeteria, the case was clear-cut. Or was it?

Kim, accused of starting the fight, was one of the students Sara admired most in the school. He and his family had come to Canada from Asia the previous year, and Kim had mastered English in no time. He got excellent grades and had never been to her office for even the slightest infraction. In contrast, the two Caucasian students standing before her had been part of the trouble the previous spring. These boys were frequent visitors to her office, and seemed to spend more time making problems than they did getting an education.

The new rules were clear: All three boys should be suspended for fighting. Yet Kim told Sara



MORAL ACTION REQUIRES A STRONG SENSE OF SELF AND A LARGE DOSE OF BRAVERY

privately that he had been taunted for months and had tried to get help from teachers who did nothing to support him. To further complicate matters, Kim pleaded with Sara: "Please don't call my parents. Trouble at school brings shame upon my community."

The "justice versus mercy" tension central to this true story is familiar to anyone involved in school leadership. Sara may be tempted to break with the fighting policy in its infancy out of compassion for a student she suspects was singled out because of race. But if she turns her back on the rule at this early stage, she risks undermining it and jeopardizing the safety of all her students.

Given the public and controversial nature of the students' fight, Sara is sure the whole school community — students, teachers, trustees and even parents — will pay keen attention to her actions. It's unlikely everyone will agree with her point of view. Whatever Sara decides will take some clear ethical reasoning and a large measure of moral courage. Is she up to the task?

In his new book, *Moral Courage* (William Morrow, 2005), Rushworth Kidder, president of the Institute for Global Ethics, explains that "Standing up for values is the defining feature of moral courage. But having values is ■■■

different from living by values . . . moral courage lifts values from the theoretical to the practical and carries us beyond ethical reasoning to principled action."

In this case, Sara can take measure of her "principled action" by considering:

Principles: Which core ethical values are at stake here?
Danger: What is the extent of the risk involved with this decision?
Endurance: Is she prepared to weather the hardship this decision may incur?

Principles: A deep understanding of core ethical values is key to taking moral action. Our research from the Institute for Global Ethics points to a set of core principles that surface globally in both surveys and face-to-face consensus activities. Across races, cultures, languages, age groups and genders, five basic ideals resonate: honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness and compassion. Wrong, in its simplest definition, comes about when these values are not upheld. It is wrong to be dishonest, disrespectful, irresponsible, unfair or downright mean.

While determining right versus wrong can be difficult, right versus right is often even more challenging. What is the best decision if both options are right and you can't do both? Fairness often conflicts with compassion; honesty often clashes with responsibility. School leaders, teachers, students and parents face complex ethical dilemmas daily.

The Institute has observed four general paradigms that most dilemmas fit:

- Truth versus loyalty
- Individual versus community
- Short term versus long term
- Justice versus mercy

While Sara's dilemma is a strong example of a justice versus mercy conflict, her decision certainly has short- and long-term ramifications, and the individual versus community paradigm also comes into play as she considers Kim's needs in contrast to those of the larger school community. These paradigms can act as lenses to help Sara analyze her conundrum from a variety of angles and bring into focus the "higher right" she must uphold.

Danger: As Sara considers which of her conflicting core values should take precedence, she must also examine the risk her dilemma implies. Based on an analysis of scores of examples about moral courage, our research suggests three important aspects to consider:

Ambiguity: confusion, uncertainty, conflicting ideas. Even if I don't have all the facts, can I make an informed decision? School leaders must ask the intelligent questions and seek the pertinent facts. But they must avoid hiding behind the excuse of "I'll wait until things get clearer," even while they resist the urge to gallop ahead of a reasoned analysis.

Public exposure: prominence, being out front, taking the lead. Will my decision stand the scrutiny of those around me? Will this attention distract or contribute to our purpose? Good school leaders are comfortable holding up their decisions for all to examine, and take into account the time and active educating that may be needed as a result.

Personal loss: wealth, reputation, position. What's the "fallout"? If my reputation were at stake — or that of my school — would the decision still be "worth it"? Is this worth my job, my prosperity, my career? School leaders must gauge the impact of their choices on a personal level, not only for themselves, but for everyone involved.

Endurance: Along with upholding principles, and taking danger into account, Sara must search her level of commitment over the long haul.

What will she need to rely upon, inside herself, if the going gets tough? Will past experience serve to bolster her confidence moving ahead? Is her character such that, once she has determined the best course of action, she can find in herself the fortitude and patience to field and consider outside criticism? Perhaps her faith will become a source of support or perhaps her own intuition.

And finally, what can she predict about the culture in which she's operating? Has she developed enough trust with students and staff so that they will still rely on her ethics even if they disagree with her decision? In other words, do they trust her when she explains her decision was truly a conflict between two "rights"? Will they trust her even if confidentiality prevents her from specifying the exact nature of her dilemma?

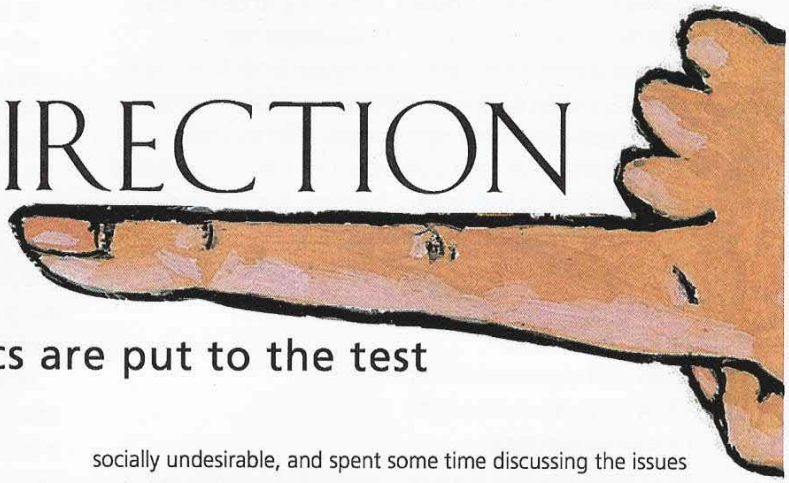
Principles, danger and **endurance** play interlaced roles in our decision-making. While Sara might not have much time to consider a way forward with her dilemma, she will need to engage all three components in deciding what to do.

What would increase Sara's preparedness for these difficult and often unexpected challenges? There is no substitute for experience — for learning courage, as Aristotle said, by doing courageous acts. That can happen in professional development workshops, where a consideration of the elements of moral courage, and the tough ethical challenges that require it, strengthen the skill set school leaders rely upon to maintain trust and credibility. Or it can happen in real life situations such as Sara faced.

Sara did indeed bend the rules in Kim's case, but not to the breaking point. She allowed him an in-school suspension, instead of sending him home, and reports that the outcome was, on the whole, quite successful. The new rule on fighting was salvaged to the satisfaction of students, staff and trustees. Meanwhile, Kim's reputation among his community remained intact. Would that all our challenging ethical dilemmas could turn out so well!

Building ethical awareness comes with no guarantee of simplifying one's life. But today's school leaders can and must develop the reasoning skills and moral courage essential to high integrity and sound ethical decision-making. ■

HEAD IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION



Think about what's right before your ethics are put to the test

The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University in California provides evidence that thinking about what's right before your ethics are put to the test strengthens the conscience and our ability to apply core values. They cite Steven Sherman, a psychologist who has furthered the work of Stanley Milgram.

In Milgram's experiments, although subjects could see that they were inflicting harm and became increasingly agitated by their task, most of them were willing to administer up to the highest level of electrical shock on other humans when told to do so by the experimenter. Although these "victims" were only pretending, Milgram found that, in cases where people are ordered to action by an authority, most will go along and ignore their own conscience.

However, Sherman's work suggests that "education can strengthen the power of conscience over authority." [Experimenters] asked participants what they would do if they were ever ordered to perform a certain act that was morally or socially undesirable, and spent some time discussing the issues with them. The Markkula Center reports: "Several weeks after the contact was made, these same people were actually asked to carry out that act. Surprisingly, two-thirds refused to obey the order, a sharp contrast to Milgram's finding that two-thirds of those ordered to act against their conscience would normally obey." (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2004 — http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/conscience.html)

Sherman's work implies that considering the elements of moral courage, and the tough ethical challenges that require it, will bolster our preparedness for the future. It behooves each of us to notice the sources of authority likely to lead us astray. For youngsters, peer pressure can become Sherman's experimenter. For adults, a boss, a board or even a dysfunctional culture can prove to be that negative source of authority, as several recent U.S. debacles have borne out. School leaders must make strengthening and fine-tuning their personal moral compasses a priority. ■ — *Paula Mirk*