Defining Moments

When Managers Must Choose between Right and Right

Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr.

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Dirty Hands

THOUGHTFUL MANAGERS sometimes face business problems that raise difficult, deeply personal questions. In these situations, managers find themselves wondering: Do I have to leave some of my values at home when I go to work? How much of myself—and of what I really care about—do I have to sacrifice to get ahead? When I get to the office, who am I?

Difficult questions like these are often matters of right versus right, not right versus wrong. Sometimes, a manager faces a difficult problem and must choose between two ways of resolving it. Each alternative is the right thing to do, but there is no way to do both.

Consider, for example, the problem faced by Rebecca Dennet, a branch manager for a major bank. Her boss, a senior executive, told her that her branch would be shut down in two months, shortly after the first of the year. The executive asked Dennet to keep the information confidential because important regulatory papers had yet to be filed, and she agreed to do so.

Two days later, a coworker asked Dennet if she knew anything about the rumor that the branch would soon be closed. When she hesitated, the coworker grew impatient and said, "Look, this is

serious. There aren't a lot of jobs around here. Do I cut back on Christmas gifts? Do you know anything?"

What should Dennet have done? The right thing, of course, was to answer the question honestly—after all, she did know something. It is also right to be loyal to friends, and the woman asking for help and guidance was a good friend. But saying nothing was also right. As a corporate officer, Dennet's duty was to maintain confidentiality, and she had explicitly promised to do so. Clearly, her choice was not between right and wrong, but between right and right.

Rebecca Dennet's problem is hardly unique. Although the details differ, good managers often struggle with some version of this predicament. They want to live up to their personal standards and values, they have to meet the expectations of their customers and shareholders—often in the face of relentless profit pressures—and their own jobs are the foundation of their families' security. Most managers also want to be fair to the people who work for them, lend a hand to people in need, earn the respect of their families and friends, and maintain their personal integrity.

Most of the time, managers find ways to juggle all these responsibilities and aspirations. In some cases, however, they cannot. Then these responsible, successful, achievement-oriented people face the prospect of a serious kind of personal failure: the failure to live up to the commitments they have made and the standards by which they want to live. For managers who struggle with these kinds of situations, the stakes are very high. They go to the heart of what it means to be successful manager and a decent, responsible person.

CRUCIBLES OF CHARACTER

Situations like Rebecca Dennet's are sometimes called "dirty hands" problems. This peculiar name comes from the title of a play by the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. The story takes place in wartime. Its main characters include the veteran leader of an underground unit of the Communist party and a zealous young party

member. At a crucial moment in the drama, the young man accuses his leader of betraying the party's ideals, through the compromises he has made with reactionary political forces.

The older man answers this harsh accusation in the following words:

> *How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. . . . To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your side, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently?*[1]

Do you think you can govern innocently? This is a powerful, haunting question, to which we will return at several points in this book. For now, however, the question has a single, clear, disturbing implication. The old Communist suggests that men and women who have power over the lives and livelihoods of others must almost inevitably get their hands dirty—not in the sense of rolling up their sleeves and working hard, but in the sense of losing their moral innocence.

For Rebecca Dennet and other managers, the question is: Do you think you can manage innocently? The veteran party leader poses the question in a way that reveals his answer. Only the naive, he believes, think that leaders can avoid dirty hands. But is this so? Are dirty hands really the inevitable lot of successful men and women with real power and responsibility in life? The Communist is a political leader in wartime. What does he have in common with a business manager?

Consider the reflections of Chester Barnard. Although few people know his name, Barnard was among this century's most insightful observers of business leaders. He combined an incisive mind with years of hands-on management experience to write *The Functions of the Executive,* a classic of management literature. First published in 1938, the book remains in print after more than 40 editions.

For many years, Barnard lived a remarkable double life. He spent his weekdays as the president of the Bell System in New Jersey, at a time when the phone company was a leading high-technology company. He spent evenings and weekends writing his masterwork on leadership and organization.

Barnard discusses managers' responsibilities at length. At one point, he makes an observation as remarkable and disturbing as the old Communist's. "It seems to me inevitable," Barnard warns, "that the struggle to maintain cooperation among men should as surely destroy some men morally as battle destroys them physically."[2]

This passage is remarkable as much for Barnard's realism as for the strength of his convictions. Management is not, for Barnard at least, the upbeat adventure described in many management books. It is the "struggle" to get people to work together. Moreover, he views his troubling conclusion as a dead certainty, calling it "inevitable."

Even more striking is the similarity between Barnard's conclusion and the view that Sartre expresses through the old Communist. Both men believed that positions of leadership impose difficult personal challenges that can destroy some men and women and strengthen others. For Barnard, leadership brings the risk of moral destruction. For Sartre, it raises the prospect of "dirty hands." Both men believed, in essence, that positions of leadership are crucibles of character.

How did two such different men—an American business executive and a French existentialist philosopher—come to share this conclusion? Part of the answer is that both were deeply engaged in the same quest: the effort to learn the bottom facts about the lives and decisions of individuals who have power over others and struggle at times with their responsibilities.

The other part of the answer is best understood by looking at the origins of dilemmas like Rebecca Dennet's. Positions of power carry complicated responsibilities. On some occasions, these responsibilities conflict with each other. At other times, they conflict with a manager's personal values. All of these responsibilities, personal and professional, have strong moral claims, but often there is no way for a manager to meet every claim. These are not the ethical issues of right and wrong that we learn about as children. They are conflicts of right versus right.

Neither Barnard nor Sartre believed that right-versus-right conflicts were purely intellectual issues. They knew that choices between right and right are fraught with personal risk. In these cases, when managers do one right thing, they leave other right things undone. They feel they are letting others down and failing to live up to their standards. The loss of innocence seems real, their hands feel dirty, and sometimes the moral calamity that Barnard warned of seems all too close.

Right-versus-right conflicts become questions about life and not just management for another reason: their finality. Once Rebecca Dennet makes a decision and implements it, there will be no turning back. She will have written a paragraph or a page of her personal and professional autobiography. Her choices will be recorded, not on a word processor that permits endless revisions, but in life's permanent record.

Right-versus-right issues are troubling, complicated, and serious. They are also too important to ignore. Good people in management jobs must sometimes make very hard choices. At issue is what it means to be a successful manager and a thoughtful, responsible human being. On this, Barnard and Sartre agree. So, too, would countless thoughtful managers, who struggle to balance their conflicting obligations in responsible, practical ways.

Beyond Inspirational Ethics

This book examines the right-versus-right conflicts that every business manager faces. It presents an unorthodox and pragmatic way to think about these conflicts and resolve them. For managers, right-versus-right decisions are uniquely important choices. They can have powerful and often irrevocable consequences for the lives of the men and women who must make the decisions and for their organizations as well.

The approach presented here parts company with the standard inspirational answers to hard management problems. Most managers have heard the speeches in which executives champion a corporate credo or mission statement and exhort everyone to "Do the right

thing." These speeches serve a useful purpose. They are usually sincere, some are genuinely inspiring, and they may even keep some employees on the straight and narrow.

But the inspirational approach offers little help with serious conflicts of responsibility. The truly difficult question is the one that Barnard and Sartre raise: What to do when one clear right thing must be left undone in order to do another or when doing the right thing requires doing something wrong? For managers, these problems are especially complex. Their right-versus-right problems typically involve choices between two or more courses of action, each of which is a complicated bundle of ethical responsibilities, personal commitments, moral hazards, and practical pressures and constraints.

Inspirational ethics usually avoids problems like these. It also ignores Barnard's warning and the problem of dirty hands. Uplifting platitudes ring hollow for these issues. They lead to deep and turbulent ethical waters. The question of right versus right sometimes reminds managers of difficult experiences of their own, which they would rather not recall because they involve feelings of failure, guilt, or loss. The question Do you think you can govern innocently? is unsettling, emotionally and intellectually. Our natural reaction is to respond yes, but this contradicts our experience.

Yet, to make progress on these issues, one must begin by looking them in the face. This is not a simple matter. The first step is to examine the basic kinds of right-versus-right problems that managers must solve. The next chapter does this through detailed accounts of problems facing three different managers.

The second step is to understand, in depth, why right-versus-right conflicts are so difficult. Much of the time, we think about problems in terms of unexamined categories, the familiar little boxes that we use to sort problems—as legal issues, business ethics issues, management issues, and so on. And, once we put a problem in the right box, we think we have the tools for solving it. But right-versus-right choices can't be forced into familiar categories, and they evade standard solutions. Neither Barnard nor Sartre would have dwelt on the problem of conflicting responsibilities if the answer were a simple matter of finding the right category and applying the right concepts.

This book argues that right-versus-right choices are best understood as *defining moments.* These are decisions with three basic charac-

teristics: they reveal, they test, and they shape. In other words, a right-versus-right decision can reveal a manager's basic values and, in some cases, those of an organization. At the same time, the decision tests the strength of the commitments that a person or an organization has made. Finally, the decision casts a shadow forward. It shapes the character of the person and, in some cases, the organization.

THE URGENT QUESTIONS

For managers, the urgent questions are: How do I think about defining moments? How do I resolve them in ways I can live with? This book offers practical advice for reflecting on right-versus-right conflicts and finding ways to resolve them. In exploring three such conflicts in depth, it provides a framework for thinking through these difficult decisions.

The framework consists of a series of phrases and questions, each with deep roots in classic and contemporary moral philosophy. The questions encourage reflection, evoke personal perspectives and experiences, and invite self-assessment. They challenge managers to reflect on their relationships with people at work, at home, and in their communities. Each of these phrases and questions is based on a powerful idea about life and work, but readers must meet them halfway in order to understand and apply them. In other words, this approach to difficult choices does not stand at a lectern and tell people what to do. Instead, each question or phrase taps people on the shoulder, surprises them a bit, and then suggests a way of reflecting on some important aspect of their lives and their work.

The "dirty hands" passage offers a glimpse of this approach to ethical problems. "Dirty hands" is not simply a colorful phrase. Nor is it intended as a snapshot summary of Sartre's philosophy. And, although it can be the focus of rigorous philosophical analysis, that is not its role here.[3]

"Dirty hands" often reminds people of difficult episodes in their lives. So, too, does the question Do you think you can govern innocently? The phrase and the question can evoke memories, images, experiences, and feelings. They may also awaken abiding feel-

ings of remorse about ethical failures or give people a sense of hard-won pride as they recall moral struggles they have handled well. This personal perspective is doubly valuable. It encourages people—whether managers or not—to reflect on their own lives and experiences. At the same time, it gives them an empathic view, a view from the inside, of what is at stake when managers and others must resolve serious conflicts among their responsibilities.