

Urban Meyer, Ohio State Football, and How Leaders Ignore Unethical Behavior

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Urban Meyer, the highly-decorated head football coach of Ohio State University was recently suspended without pay for three games for how he handled domestic violence allegations against his long-time assistant coach, Zach Smith. Meyer claimed to have not known about Smith's behavior, but evidence emerged that he had knowledge of domestic abuse claims back in 2015. The school summarized its decision in a revealing 23-page investigation report, which serves as a useful case study for the way organizations, leaders, and individuals fall victim to moral biases – rationalizations for behaving unethically usually due to one's self-interest.

A sizable literature in management and psychology helps us understand how people become susceptible to moral biases and make choices that are inconsistent with their values and the values of their organizations. Reading the report with that lens can help leaders better understand the biases that get in the way of ethical conduct and ethical organizations.

Performance over principles. One number may surpass all other details in this case: 90%. That's the percentage of games the team has won under Meyer as head coach since he joined Ohio State in 2012. Psychological research shows that in almost every area of life, being moral is weighted as more important than being competent. However, in competitive environments such as work and sports, the classic findings flip: competence is prized over character. Although the report does not mention anything about the team's performance or the resulting financial and reputational benefits of winning, the program's success may have crowded out concerns over the allegations against Smith and about the many other problematic behaviors he showed.

Unspoken values. Another factor that can increase the likelihood of making unethical decisions is the absence of language around values. Classic research in organizations has found that leaders tend to be reluctant to use "moral language." For example, leaders are more likely to talk about deadlines, objectives, and effectiveness than values such as integrity, respect, and compassion. Over time, this can license unethical conduct.

Similarly, leaders and employees tend to use euphemistic language to describe unethical actions in sanitized terms. This can make people less aware that certain decisions are unethical, or lead them to feel less guilty about the consequences, potentially leading to further misbehavior.

For example, the report describes Meyer being untruthful on multiple occasions, but only once does it say his actions "cast doubt on his own honesty," and it concludes by saying he did not "deliberately lie." Smith's behavior is described as "problematic" and "questionable," but not unethical. Meyer stated that his statements to the press during Big 10 Football Media Days were "not completely accurate" and "misstatements" even though the evidence suggests he knew he was not telling the truth.

Unfortunately, leaders are often coached to use these terms, so as to not signal blame, and reports also tend to use cautious language. However, this kind of language, meant to deflect liability, has an unintended consequence: it can make it harder to prevent unethical behavior in the future.

Sins of omission. Humans tend to judge harmful actions as worse than equally harmful inactions, or omissions. For example, most people find it worse to blatantly lie than simply to withhold the truth. This phenomenon is referred to as the omission bias and has been well-replicated in the social sciences.

The investigation report is replete with examples of omissions by the many parties involved. For example, there is no mention that there were nine police reports involving domestic disputes between Zach and his now ex-wife, Courtney Smith, between 2012-2018. Meyer and Smith had worked together previously, at the University of Florida, and the report shows Meyer knew had been arrested for domestic abuse in 2009 (the charges were ultimately dropped), but did not inform Ohio State when he recruited Smith to work for him there in 2012.

We tend to think that omitting relevant information is not as harmful as lying or doing something unethical but it can be just as deceptive, making it difficult to pinpoint wrongdoing and correct it.

Blind loyalty. In many ways loyalty is an important societal virtue. However, loyalty can also cause people to look past others' unethical behavior. Numerous studies highlight that individuals face a dilemma between being loyal and being fair and that they often tilt towards loyalty. The fact that we have a plethora of slights for people who are disloyal, even in the name of justice (e.g., whistleblower, snitch, tattletale), suggests the importance we place on being loyal - we derogate these brave people who speak up about transgressions in organizations.

The report suggests loyalty may have been one reason why Meyer did not want to believe or address Smith's alleged abuse. It stated that Smith's grandfather, Earle Bruce, was a long-time mentor of Meyer. In fact, when Coach Meyer informed the university leadership about Smith's firing, the report said he "conveyed his regret in firing Bruce's grandson, not his disappointment of Smith's behavior." The report also said that Meyer discounted information about Smith's extensive record of misconduct and warned Smith many times before ultimately firing him in July 2018. Loyalty is often a good thing - but when it blinds us from principles such as honesty and fairness, it becomes problematic.

Hypocrisy. Sometimes people like to appear moral, while avoiding the costs of behaving morally. Researchers call this "moral hypocrisy" and have demonstrated the great lengths people will go to in order to be seen as ethical. In Meyer's case, after he learned about Smith's trip to a strip club on a recruiting trip, he revised the 2014 Coaches' Manual to include a "morality clause." When he ultimately fired Smith, he emphasized Smith's "violations of the core value of honesty" and said that firing him was the "right thing to do." This tendency to overlook one's own contributions to a problem not only blinds leaders to their own indiscretions, hurting their reputation and preventing them from remedying future behavior, it can also damage team morale.

How Can Organizations and Leaders Tackle Moral Biases?

The labyrinth of moral biases depicted in this report are unfortunately not unique to The Ohio State University. All organizations, leaders, and individuals at times fall victim to faulty forms of ethical reasoning. What lessons can be learned so that you and your organization can avoid being in a similar situation?

Gain awareness. The first step in guarding against these moral biases is awareness. It is critical to have enough awareness to know if self-interest is driving how you reason about issues with moral or legal importance. If you wrestle with an ethical decision and come to a conclusion that is perfectly aligned with your own self-interest then it may be a sign that you are engaging in motivated reasoning to get the outcome you want. People who question the morality of their decisions are more likely to consistently act in line with their values and those of society.

Make it a group effort. Because self-interest can make it hard to truly gain awareness, it helps to make important ethical decisions with a group of people with diverse goals, interests, and motivations. To avoid groupthink regarding ethical challenges, organizations should have people in the decision-making process who represent a broad host of stakeholders. It is also useful to do an audit of your organization's ethical culture to see if there are appropriate practices for addressing ethical issues. And employees must feel comfortable speaking up if they believe there has been an ethical transgression.

Develop routines, rituals, and mantras. For most leaders and employees who face pressure to perform, it can be difficult to act in line with their core values. It is important to develop rituals that help reinforce one's self-control and discipline to adhere to one's values. For example, reading your personal code of ethics, reminding yourself of your purpose, keeping a gratitude journal, and turning to trusted colleagues can help you keep your core values front and center when making decisions. Also, many leaders benefit from mantras such as the "front-page" test which asks them how they would feel if their actions were on the front page of the newspaper.

Being ethical is hard work. The Ohio State case should serve as a cautionary tale to other organizations and motivate them to visit the ways they identify and remedy bias.



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